



SUCCESSION

*SAIS Heads of School
in their own words*



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Succession Planning and the Transition of Leaders in Independent Schools

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***“Adjust the sails from time to time,
but focus on Ithaca.”***

INTRODUCTION

"I am interested in creating a written procedure for transitioning the Head of School. I appreciate anyone sharing a document."

This seemingly innocuous post was made to the SAISconnect group for Heads of School in the early part of May of 2013. Within a brief period, a substantial number of Heads of School throughout all corners of the SAIS network responded that they would also appreciate such a document should anyone have one. The range of respondents was vast - long time Heads looking at retirement within just a few years, Heads at transition points of their careers, Heads of large schools, Heads of smaller schools, Heads of schools located in urban settings, and Heads of schools located in rural settings.

SAIS offered to collate documents and produce a white paper addressing transition and succession planning; an innocuous seeming task.

SAIS identified a group of Heads who would be representative of the vast array of schools and situations within the independent school world. Approximately forty hours of interviews have been condensed into the wisdom contained in this booklet. Some of the Heads had already retired; others were years away. What bound them all together is an abiding concern – both for their own future, but almost, most significantly, for the future of the schools they served and the futures of the individuals whose lives they might touch by sharing experiences, both the good ones (their triumphs and successes), as well as the bad ones (their frustrations and failures).

The ensuing paper is a compilation of the insights shared by novice, experienced, retiring, retired, and interim heads, and offers an overview of the transition process. It is by no means a checklist

of what to do; rather it purports to share a series of narratives, organized by quotes, from those who have experienced transition first hand.

At the conclusion of the sections that are given "in their own words," you will find a sample template around which conversation can be built. As you will notice after reading these pages, there is not one process that fits all; each situation is unique. The final pages of this booklet contain an aspirational article from SAIS President Dr. Steve Robinson, as he lays out the case for growing talent from within and giving that talent a fair shake when transitions do occur.

Holly Chesser, a veteran educator of numerous SAIS schools and the author of The Mission-Centered School, conducted the interviews and authored this essay during the late spring and early summer of 2013. The contents of this paper were originally released in serialized format in the SAIS eNewsletter in the Fall of 2013 leading up to the publication of this booklet at the end of October 2013. The paper by Dr. Robinson was originally published in September 2012.

The opinions expressed in these pages are a faithful rendering of the Heads of School - in their own words.

THE OUTGOING HEAD

“TIMING IS EVERYTHING.”

While the school year operates by a well-regulated clock, so too does the five-year accreditation or strategic plan cycle. In contemplating retirement or a transition to another school, many heads take timing into close consideration, hoping their exit will cause the least amount of disruption to the school. One head shared the philosophy behind the timing of his departure. His school operates on a five-year strategic cycle. He purposefully chose the second year in that cycle as his last. He anticipated that a new head would assume control in the third year, which he identified as the smoothest in terms of pursuing the strategic plan and the goals outlined in the accreditation process. Although the school ultimately chose an interim, he still believes that the permanent head can assume the reins in the fourth year with little difficulty. He worked his final year, the second in the five-year cycle, as though he would be there for ten more. He didn't institute major changes or engage the staff or faculty in conversations about the school outside of his tenure. Unable to relate to “I” thinking, he focused on how he might position the school to operate successfully on its own rhythm.



Another head reiterated the importance of timing both in the life of the school and in her own capacity to continue to lead energetically and enthusiastically. Since her personal contract was renewed in three-year increments, she set the financial and strategic goals for the school in three-year cycles. In her twelve-year tenure, she had focused on major changes in facilities and programming and had overseen the completion of a 20 million dollar capital campaign. In anticipating retirement, she focused first on

the school. Accreditation was recently completed, and she knew that a retirement announcement and subsequent celebrations would garner donations for certain projects that still needed to come to full realization. She also recognized that the school's next initiative to develop a 21st century curriculum and instructional model would require at least a five-year commitment. She didn't want to take on that next step, knowing that the next head might not agree with the initiative's direction and could possibly dismantle it. Most importantly, she knew the limits of her energy and enthusiasm; she knew she didn't want to “live bone tired” and felt that “all the tricks in her bag had been played.” Possessing a keen sense of her own timing, she chose to retire when she felt it would serve both her and the school's needs.

“ORGANIZATION IS THE BEST FACILITATOR OF FREEDOM.”

Few heads described strong leadership in conventional terms. Instead, the word humility was repeatedly used to describe the key characteristic of strong leadership. Heads employed the word humility, with its etymological roots meaning literally of the ground, to de-emphasize the hierarchical prominence of their positions and to emphasize seeing themselves as secondary to the schools they lead.

One head in particular stressed the singular importance of organization as the central principle to good leadership. Applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to a school, he explained that the actualization of the school's mission, the apex of Maslow's pyramid that allows for the expression of real synergy and innovation, can only be achieved when faculty, staff, students, and parents have full confidence and security in the organization of the school. He underscored that it is the head's responsibility to create that foundation so that everyone can share and pursue ideas without fear and with enthusiasm. Moreover, he explained that a head cannot bully the culture into confidence; rather, he must undertake his work with an ironic combination of humility and determination. He must continually engage in a give-and-take with all

constituents, working to ensure that the stated mission, operating principles, and organizational structure are consistently and fairly applied.

Organization also implies unity. One head emphasized the need for a “whole-school” approach, explaining that a school that operates in silos either through its divisions or its programs may be particularly vulnerable to disruption during a transition. Without a collaborative and integrative spirit during times of change, a school may respond with anxiety and retreat into smaller groups to form allegiances. Often schools attempt to bolster faculty collegiality through parties, but this head insisted that a school only operates with a collective spirit when there is interaction with the “work”: they need to professionally develop around a common mission together.

“ADJUST SAILS FROM TIME TO TIME BUT FOCUS ON ITHACA.”

Not surprisingly, many heads identified the integrity of a school’s mission as the key to a smooth transition. A school, defined as all of its constituents, must understand and fully embrace its stated mission – its *raison d’être*. When a school only gives lip service to its mission, employing it merely for marketing purposes, but failing to ensure it possesses face validity, it leaves itself open to the possibility of others defining its purpose and principles. Certainly, a strong-willed, powerful head can lead with his own understanding of the school’s mission. But when that head exits,



the perception of that mission often lies open to interpretation. For that reason, a number of heads emphasized the head’s role as defender and promoter of a shared understanding of the mission’s integrity. These individuals

work tirelessly to ensure that everyone appreciates, articulates, and advances the mission in their daily work. Moreover, they require the command chain to do the same, even embedding that expectation into their evaluation processes. Recognizing that a key component of motivation theory is ownership, they help the administration, staff, faculty, parents, and students recognize that the mission belongs to them, not to the head of school. One head in particular even emphasized that he demands that every member of the school including himself, determine before a decision is made or action undertaken whether it aligns first and foremost with the school’s mission. He defends that litmus test as the central means of ensuring mission integrity.

Other heads cited the dissonance between a school’s written mission and its lived mission as the central reason for their unsuccessful transition. They acknowledged that, until one is actually a member of the school community, it is difficult to determine if the school’s stated values are actually woven into the life of the school. While strategic planning and common language can create alignment among culture, mission, and vision, determining whether that consonance truly exists at any given school remains difficult. In retrospect, a few heads admitted, they might not even see the blind spots a second time around.

“SERVICE IS THE STRENGTH OF A SCHOOL.”

Schools have long been viewed as hierarchical in nature with the headmaster ruling the realm. One head conceded that she had seen a few kings and queens in the business over the years; nevertheless, she stressed that the good ones were servant leaders, a perspective shared by many heads. These heads emphasized that the seemingly oxymoronic nature of servant leadership actually holds great power. Faculty and students don’t expect the head to listen; they expect him to command. Yet, heads that exhibited genuine empathy and a willing ear found they developed trust, love, and confidence from and in those around them. They insisted on walking “shoulder to shoulder” with their teams and hoped

that they served as models for leadership that others in their communities would emulate.

An emphasis on service, they insisted, helped a school understand its purpose, a requisite to successful transition. They cited a big ego possessed by the head, a member of the board, or a various stakeholder as often the culprit in an unsuccessful transition. Schools are in the people business; they exist to help individuals learn, develop, master, and lead. One retired head lamented that he misses school and the community of school, but he doesn't miss being a head. He shared that he'd heard a few retired heads remark that they miss their expense accounts, which in his estimation is a poor commentary on their value as heads. Instead, he missed teaching, the interaction with the students, and the invigoration of being part of a learning community.

"THE TRUTH IS THERE IS NO ROLE."

Perhaps the hardest lesson for a retiring head to accept, especially after a long, successful tenure, is that once he makes the decision to retire, his voice already begins to lose its resonance. One retired head advised that getting comfortable with this harsh truth, even as a young head, is important: you must relinquish any power you had as head when you leave that school. Almost all retired heads agreed that the outgoing head should offer no input on the future direction of the school unless asked. The board chair may certainly seek advice during and before the search, but the outgoing head must accept a new deferential role in the organization. Taking a back seat is often difficult for a leader, especially when his shadow has been quite large, but loyalty means wanting what is best for the school. A school community in transition, more than anything, needs to see full support from the outgoing head for the incoming head. The outgoing head, despite the best of intentions, should not feel that his role is to protect mid-level administrators or insulate anyone from possible future ramifications of a transition. If he is unable to support the decisions of the board or cannot work on a successful transition, he must step down. Granted,

this may be particularly difficult when there are hard feelings, but a head must consider the good of the school first and foremost. Most importantly, a retired head should not feel comfortable hearing from staff or faculty that things aren't going well or that they wish he were still at the helm. If he delights in such remarks, submitted one head, it's a commentary on his character. Heads, even retired heads, should want what is best for their schools and their students.

"DON'T COME BACK UNLESS INVITED."

All heads agreed, at least in principle although admittedly not always in practice, that when it's time to leave, abide by a few important rules: say goodbye, hopefully on good terms, get as far away as possible, don't mettle, and don't make judgments about what the school is doing. They advise to act in the manner of our country's past presidents and go underground, at least for a time. Too often, however, a former head stays far too visible and doesn't allow the new head to become the face of the school. This behavior creates conflicting feelings for many people and, depending on his security, may undermine the confidence of the new head.

One retired head recalled that after a long tenure, he continued to live very close to campus. Nevertheless, he didn't step foot on campus until four months into that first year, and then only to attend a football game. He commended the present head who graciously and kindly invited him often and made him feel welcome. However, he felt that it was important not to be a presence.

Another head, who plans to hand the reins over to an internal candidate, will assume



the role of president emeritus. Although he will work for development, he fully acknowledges that that process is dependent on him “getting out of the way.” He, like other past board chairs, will still attend board meetings; however, he will not speak unless called upon. Having helped groom the succeeding head, he, as much as anyone, wants to see him succeed.

“YOU DON’T OWN THE SCHOOL, AND IT SHOULDN’T OWN YOU.”

Heads regularly report that they live, eat, and breathe school. Their days often begin before dawn and end shortly before bed. They, despite their humility, possess power and command respect. In the midst of this fast-paced, demanding work, a head may eagerly anticipate the freedom he will one day enjoy at retirement. However, in reality, many heads actually find retirement challenging.

They struggle to find new meaningful activities to replace work and feel a sense of purposelessness in pursuing leisure. Retirement equates to the loss of everything that has motivated a head throughout his life, and may force him to confront whether he is completely defined by what he does and whether he ends where the job does. In short, many retired heads advise a current head to carefully prepare as much for the end of his career as for its development.

One retired head emphasized that present heads need to plan for retirement both financially and personally. He encouraged them to discover interests they can pursue with vigor outside of school: travel, sports, writing, research, and grandchildren. Some heads, he explained, make school the only focus in their lives. While he respects dedication, he believes this narrow concentration may ultimately backfire. He has witnessed a few of these heads continue to pursue their attachment by living vicariously through others still at the helm.

THE BOARD

“THE BOARD HIRES THE HEAD.”

One of the primary obligations of the board is to hire and evaluate the head of school. That individual, regardless of the individual institution, must possess curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, political and community acumen, and organizational and management skills. Nevertheless, each school undergoing a search for a new head must identify its organization’s present and future challenges in order to consider the characteristics and experiences a potential candidate should possess to meet those challenges and guide the school to continued success. This process rests wholly in the hands of the board.

Furthermore, the board of trustees provides the strategic vision for the school and oversees its financial wellbeing; its role focuses exclusively on strategy and policymaking. The head, primarily responsible for ensuring the facilitation of the school’s mission, oversees the daily operations of the school. While the head of school and the board of trustees should work in concert, their roles are distinctly defined.

Nevertheless, many heads referenced instances of confusion between the two where lines of influence and jurisdiction were blurred. Some heads, especially those with close ties in time or ethos to the original school founder and those who have served long tenures, felt a natural and special kinship with the school that led them to involve themselves intimately in choosing their successors. One head, having closely handpicked individual trustees over her tenure so as to ensure their compliance, worked actively to promote an internal candidate. Although she discouraged a national search, citing its cost, the board insisted that the internal candidate would gain confidence and respect if ultimately selected from a national pool. The outgoing head was granted permission to be a silent participant in the interviews with the potential can-

didates, conversations she later shared with the internal candidate. Ultimately, the board unanimously selected the internal candidate, a decision for which the outgoing head unabashedly took credit. Although the outgoing head's behavior runs counter to best practices, she felt that the board was not as attuned to education or the faculty's need for stability.

Conversely, other heads felt that it's important that a head maintain strict adherence to a limited role. One head stated that, as an interim at multiple schools, he had been asked to serve on each of their search committees. Each time he declined, letting the school know that he felt it was inappropriate. He explained that he was willing to meet with individual candidates and give the board perspective on their strengths and weaknesses; however, he refused to answer the question of which candidate he thought was best.

"If SOMEONE WANTS TO BE BOARD CHAIR, THEY SHOULDN'T BE."

The key to a successful transition, cited with remarkable unity among all of the heads, is a good board chair. As the leader and manager of the board, the chair oversees the process of evaluating the head yet serves as the head's central adviser, a position that by its nature requires deep emotional intelligence. Since the



role holds such profound significance for a good transition, heads naturally shared stories of deep gratitude or grievance toward individual chairs.

A long tenured, outgoing head remarked how her board chair kept

her apprised throughout the transition process. He knew she cared to know and made her feel valued by confiding in her. As a result, she was able to stay focused and confident in her last year and able to assure the students and faculty that they were in good hands. Most importantly, she was eager to make the new head of school feel welcome. Additionally, she was grateful that her board

chair led the search committee, keeping members contained, explaining how they should talk publicly about the process, and ensuring that no trustee went rogue. Her chair had a deft understanding of the necessary level of transparency regarding the search process that should be shared with the community, an art not a science, according to this head.

An effective board chair understands the distinction between his strategic role and the head's operational role, an understanding that becomes especially important during a crisis when the community needs reassurance that the organizational integrity of the school remains intact. After the unexpected death of a head, one board chair, by necessity, ensured that the chain of command was instituted and a new school leader was announced. However, despite a great deal of behind the scenes planning, the chair purposefully did not make himself a visible presence on campus; he wanted the community to have faith in the interim head and the organizational structure of the school. That particular chair, according to the succeeding head, fully understood his critical role in maintaining confidence in the school's functioning.

Conversely, other heads shared stories in which a board chair overstepped the boundaries, commanding in domains outside the limits of his authority. Certainly, transitions, cycles of change, cause anxiety by nature, but this anxiety only becomes exacerbated when individuals don't trust the process and divisions of responsibility. One outgoing head felt that transitions often go poorly because the board chair micromanages the incoming head, a result he suggested of improper training. Various heads cited instances in which a board chair challenged the hiring and firing decisions that should fall under the head's purview, inserted himself too directly into the daily operations of the school, or allowed the full board to operate in factions that undermined the support and confidence of the incoming head. He maintained that training between the board chair and the head of school is critically important. He felt a bond must develop between the two that helps both recognize the significance of a healthy relationship based on

mutual respect for the clear distinction in their leadership roles:
“if that relationship goes well, the school goes well.”

“GOD ON A GOOD DAY.”

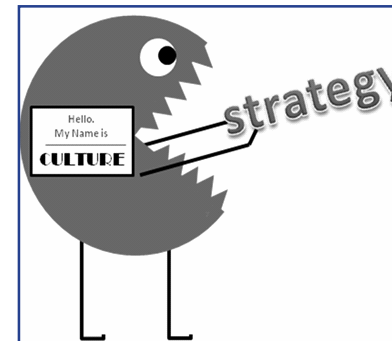
Although much has been written and discussed about the need to redesign pedagogy for the 21st century learner, there has been little focus on the changing nature of today’s board of trustees. One head highlighted the shift in how schools operate over the last twenty years, explaining that previously schools were quietly run and experienced only evolutionary change, while today many “activist” boards expect change to occur at a much speedier pace. As a result, many boards refuse to consider internal candidates, assuming those individuals, groomed by the outgoing head, will merely promote the status quo or have already offered what expertise and experience they possess. Instead, they want youth and novelty, a reflection of themselves, as one head suggested. They believe that a new name and a new face – a “savior” in essence - will energize the school and its constituencies, forgetting of course that “Jesus was ultimately run out of Nazareth.” The problem with this approach is that it suggests that the organization itself isn’t stable and that only a great, new leader can ensure the fulfillment of the school’s mission.

Instead, heads believe that boards should focus first and foremost on understanding the school’s stated mission and strategic vision and developing a list of the essential traits, experiences, and knowledge a candidate must possess in order to successfully facilitate the fulfillment of that mission. Certainly, board members sometimes do act as agents of change and are responsible for defining and protecting the school’s mission, but they should do so in a transparent fashion and in a manner that does not run counter to the culture of the school. The new head, the faculty, the parents, and the students should not be caught off guard or have to read tea leaves in order to divine the school’s future direction.

“CULTURE REALLY DOES EAT STRATEGY FOR BREAKFAST.”

Many heads underscored the fundamental challenge that lies at the heart of a successful transition: the board must understand and honor the school’s culture yet it often finds it challenging to define the school’s culture. Does the board know the ethics and values the organization abides by, the style of everyday management throughout the institution, and how communication takes place? Even heads expressed difficulty characterizing their schools’ cultures, wondering if they in their positions were fully capable of appreciating or ascertaining the school’s real pulse.

Typically, every candidate on a board’s short list possesses the benchmark skills and experiences categorized as necessary to fill the position. However, not every potential candidate is a good



cultural fit. One head stressed how critically important it is in a search for the board to understand the school culture, how and why it makes the decisions it does, and the value statements embedded in its behavior.

If the culture values collaboration, a diffuse power structure, and synergy, a head that favors a top-down, autocratic approach might turn out to be a poor choice for the organization. Likewise, if the culture is comfortable with the direction of the school and wants someone who will sustain the current traditions, but the board sees an uncertain future and believes the school needs a change agent, candidates can often get stuck in the middle. The stakes are high since a good cultural match creates trust, promotes harmony, and builds community.

A board intent on understanding the culture of its school must develop open communication pathways, must engage as many individuals as possible in the strategy formulation process, must consistently work toward a unified understanding of the school’s

mission, and must develop a language that reflects mission and value alignment. One head underscored the central imperative in which a school must consistently engage: “know thyself.”

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SAIS Institute for Experienced Heads

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THE CANDIDATE

“WE HAVE AN EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP CULTURE AT OUR SCHOOL.”

Ironically, even though schools are in the general business of talent development, most boards engaged in head searches seek talent that has been developed elsewhere. They choose external candidates despite risking the loss of programmatic continuity, cultural stability, and institutional memory. However, not all boards operate this way. Schools that find it critically important to develop a consistent model that will perpetuate and uphold the mission of the school, often develop a very intentional internal succession plan. The plan identifies and nurtures potential future leaders through an executive development program, either formally or informally.

One long-tenured head explained that he and his board leadership have made internal succession a strategic priority over the years. He shared that there were five leaders on his staff that could or would be headmasters one day. He emphasized that providing opportunities for these aspirants to interact with the board was key. Such interactions allow the board to gauge the individual’s leadership potential, and the aspirant to confront challenges common to the role of the head. Moreover, when an internal candidate is promoted, the head has nearly a full year to groom his successor. Plus, the board can develop an even more intimate relationship with the incoming head before he formally assumes the reins.

Another head shared his school’s decision to forgo a national search, recognizing that there was one exceptionally strong internal candidate. Nevertheless, the board did not simply appoint him as successor; he endured thirty to fifty hours of interviews, the same grueling process that an external candidate would endure. While the school knew that the internal candidate’s passion and body of work spoke for itself, and that he had an incredible understanding of independent school needs, the board wanted the

community to be assured that due diligence had been undertaken before a final decision was made.

Heads who have established leadership programs within their schools take great pride and pleasure in seeing their internal leaders promoted from within. They warn that boards that repeatedly refuse to consider internal candidates for leadership positions inadvertently convey to their communities that their schools do not know how to develop talent.

“GOOD PEOPLE FOR SHORT-TERM TRUMP MEDIOCRE FOR LONG-TERM.”

Naturally, when a board considers an internal candidate, but chooses an external candidate, the board runs the risk of losing a strong, key administrator who may choose to leave the school. Conversely, the evaluative process may highlight the internal candidate’s shortcomings as a true leader in the school. In either case, schools must continue to develop leadership from within.



One head shared that his school had developed an internal succession plan for every administrative position. This appears to be highly unusual since most schools do not have a written succession plan in place for anyone beyond the head of school. He explained that, in order to maintain a strong leadership culture at his school, he and the board encouraged each administrator to possess aspirations beyond their present position, even if they never acted upon those aspirations. Administrators must proactively engage in professional development, seek mentoring, and establish an intentional career path. If the school determined that a leader did not possess the attributes to grow for succession, the school terminated the relationship, typically with a healthy severance. The head acknowledged that the process has not been easy, and that he was always patient

with faculty members, perhaps even too patient. Nevertheless, he thought it was imperative that the head muster the courage to make such decisions so that only those with energy, passion, and innovative ideas continue to lead the school.

“BETTER AN INTERIM THAN A SACRIFICIAL LAMB.”

Many schools choose to hire an interim for a year for various reasons: the board is unable to find the right candidate in its search or does not have sufficient time to conduct a search; the board is replacing a long-term head and feels that an interim will provide the community some distance and time to transition; or, a school may seek the experience of an interim to smooth the waters after a stormy season. In all of these cases, the interim allows the school the chance to pursue its short-term goals, while assessing its long-term needs. Choosing to hire an interim does not indicate a failed search, nor does it suggest that the school needs stability. Instead, it allows the search committee and the board another year to ensure that the right permanent head is chosen.

Heads who have undertaken the interim role find the position richly rewarding. Often they are long-tenured heads, who are not ready to fully retire and who recognize that there is no substitute for experience. One outgoing head was powerfully influenced by a retired teacher’s comment: “Do you realize that once you retire, you become a nobody?” Unprepared to lose his authority and his role as decision maker, he chose to become an interim because he recognized that he had wisdom and energy yet to share.

Schools agree. Many heads cited a healthy rise in interim headships over the years, owing, they believe, to schools’ recognition that after a head’s lengthy tenure, a hasty appointment often proves unsuccessful. They referenced the profound negative effect a failed transition can have on the school community and on the career path of the unsuccessful head and were encouraged that more boards are recognizing the salutary benefits of a bridge year.

“WHAT’S YOUR EQ?”

In discussing the many facets of succession, all the heads expressed the importance of high emotional intelligence in the key players. In fact, most heads cited an individual’s lack of such intelligence as the central culprit in a failed search or tenure.

Unfortunately, as one head commented, emotional intelligence is difficult to measure and often not known until a crisis arises. Yet this attribute was repeatedly identified as the fundamental characteristic of strong leadership. Heads in general characterized emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize various perspectives, including one’s own, with a degree of detachment and objectivity. Possessing self-awareness, an emotionally intelligent person is not trapped within the confines of his own point of view. He exhibits a balance of confidence and humility, fully cognizant of his own strengths and weaknesses.

Individuals who lacked emotional intelligence were typically described as “micro-managers,” “kings and queens,” “bullies,” and “short-sighted.” Interestingly, most heads ascribed this behavior either to inexperience or insecurity. Asked how to develop or enhance one’s emotional intelligence, heads answered uniformly, “Listen more.”

THE SEARCH FIRM

“LEAVE A CLEAN HOUSE.”

When a search consultant met with one long-tenured head, the head asked what her role should be in the transition. He replied, “Don’t leave the next guy with a mess.” The consultant emphasized the need for the outgoing head to make any personnel changes as quickly as possible. However, heads shared two opposing perspectives on this directive.



One camp, including the head who shared this narrative, felt that the outgoing head should not make major personnel decisions on the way out the door, especially since any and all changes in a school cause a certain degree of disruption, and too much change can cause a community to reach a tipping point. Moreover, these outgoing heads felt that a successor should have the opportunity to ascertain his team’s strengths and weaknesses and choose replacements that match his style of leadership.

The other camp, whose perspective was generally shared more forcefully, believed that outgoing heads or interims “cop-out” when they don’t make these difficult decisions. One head, stating that schools are notorious for hiring too quickly and firing too slowly, shared how grateful he was to previous outgoing heads for the tough choices they made. He explained that a new head should not have to begin his tenure as the bad guy, especially when the outgoing head and the board know that personnel changes are necessary. Every new head is faced with myriad daunting challenges; he doesn’t want his first order of business to be “chopping heads,” especially when he’s working hard to build confidence and trust in his community. Another head, who shared this view, felt that an outgoing head should evaluate his staff and

make decisions accordingly as though he were going to be at the school another ten years.

“WHAT DIDN’T THEY TELL YOU?”

Search firms are in the business of finding heads. Of course, firms want to match candidates with schools to ensure long successful tenures, a success rate on which their reputations depend. Nevertheless, the firms don’t necessarily know each school’s culture, present climate, or the specific challenges that might await a new head. In fact, one head suggested that asking about the surprises each incoming head discovered after his arrival would elicit a slew of interesting stories.

A number of heads emphasized that search firms need to work assiduously to understand a school fully before it attempts to “play matchmaker.” One head shared that the search firm contracted by her board interviewed only a handful of people before assuming that it knew the school and its needs. The board, she explained, did not know what type of candidate it was looking for and sought help from the search firm for a characterization. The search was unsuccessful, but the process ultimately taught the board what and who the school was looking for. Though the search’s timetable was extended and an interim was chosen, the school found the right match in the end.

Nevertheless, some heads won’t join a search if they sense a mood of uncertainty; they don’t want to “get burned.” If the search firm does not fully understand the school’s culture, does not appreciate its values, doesn’t really “get” the school and attempts to apply a boilerplate identity, then things can easily go amiss. The candidates in the early process rely heavily on the

search firm’s description of the school and its honest assessment of whether the prospective head would be a good match. They have to count on the candor and integrity of the search firm, its willingness to do its job, and its understanding of what that job actually is.

One head emphasized that the search firm should thoroughly examine the school’s internal climate by talking to as many people as possible in its visits (parents, teachers, students, alumni, donors, etc.). With fresh perspective, they can then share their assessment with the board. Overall, the firm should stay committed to securing the right match and marriage, by focusing on the qualifications (the skill set and values) of the candidate and the culture and identity of the school.

One head also suggested that a disconnect can occur between the search committee and the board of trustees, if there is not alignment between the two groups regarding interpretation of the school’s mission and values. He wondered if sometimes a board doesn’t come “clean” with its search committee because it desires a certain candidate or wants to control the process more fully.



THE INCOMING HEAD

“WHO’S LOOKING OUT FOR THE HEAD?”

Past U.S. presidents have stated that there is no training that can fully prepare an individual for the challenges of the job. Heads of school, new and seasoned, shared similar remarks. Leading a school demands enormous time, energy, resources, and, most importantly, assistance. In short, heads need help.

When a new head is appointed, the Board has a responsibility to ensure that he is fully fortified through both a comprehensive induction program and a support system. One school created three committees intent on engaging everyone through a two-year process: a search committee, a celebration committee, and a transition committee. The last provided a great deal of support for the incoming head, meeting her needs at her new home with housekeeping, dry cleaning, yard services, and other amenities that would help her transition smoothly. Additionally, the committee provided opportunities for her and her family to engage in the school and the larger community so that they would become socially and culturally acclimated. Another head, having led



multiple schools, suggested that boards should establish a head support committee, a three-person team to help new heads successfully transition.

Heads also expressed the need for mentoring, yet

acknowledged that there was generally no internal mentor on whom they could rely. One incoming head chose to proactively contact various headmasters; those whose skill set he admired or whose schools matched his in size and reputation. This head even created a document that outlined what he hoped to achieve early

in his tenure, which he shared with his mentoring group. One of his mentors saw his eagerness to reach out as evidence of his high emotional intelligence, a good sign.

Another interim head strongly expressed his belief that retired heads would make excellent mentors, and that schools and boards lose by not tapping into this wealth of knowledge. Many boards are reluctant to employ retired heads, perhaps because they are seen as external influences. The other factor, whether due to custom or ego, is that the new head rarely contacts the retiring head for insight or wisdom. The interim said this common practice “blows his mind.” He acknowledged that boards and new heads often misconstrue such a move as a sign of weakness, but that he believed it greatly benefited the transition of a school administration. He discovered from the search firm who handled his last transition that they in fact advised incoming heads not to contact retiring heads. As such, the new head never called or sought advice, which he deemed unfortunate.

One solution that the interim believed would bridge the gap would be a mentor program where new heads were matched with retired heads. Another head suggested a program spanning one-to-two years, in which new heads would meet with a small group of experienced heads. The more seasoned heads could facilitate discussions, but would not pontificate solutions. In these “Cracker Barrel” sessions, the group would decide the topics and engage in a shared-inquiry style of discussion with an experienced head as facilitator. Both suggestions, a one-to-one mentorship or a facilitated mentoring program, would allow new heads to benefit from the accumulated knowledge and experience possessed by retired heads.

“WISDOM IN A MULTITUDE OF COUNSELORS.”

Many incoming heads spoke of the need to build relationships and alliances within the school community to ensure that they had a support team, and to develop a quick understanding of the school’s culture, climate, and concerns.



Recognizing the difficulty of transitioning into an established community with deep tentacles, one head created a team of the school’s influence leaders. The team included a nurse, a parent, a coach, a housekeeping crew member, and a few administrators and teachers. They met once a month and acted as a sounding board, so the head could accurately gauge the school’s culture. The key, he claimed, was to identify those individuals who represent the ethos and the values of the institution, and were respected by their peers.

Another head in his first year met with each employee, a number exceeding 650 school members – some individually but most in groups – and asked them what they valued and appreciated about the school, as well as what challenges and concerns they had. The answers were fairly consistent and provided the head with a comprehensive understanding of the school’s culture. Perhaps

more importantly, he believed that his staff and faculty appreciated the gesture and recognized that he valued their perspectives. As a result of what he learned, he identified four schools that he felt were similar in size to his own, excelled programmatically, and possessed strong leadership teams. As these schools were not competitors, he asked for a full-day visit at each to meet with the head and to take a tour led by the administrative team. This process helped clarify his own strategic plans, a perspective he could not have gained alone.

A seasoned head who has led multiple schools through successful tenures advised succinctly, “You’d be a fool not to ask for help.” He encourages heads to build cooperative relationships with their boards, their faculties, and their parents, even intermingling the three on committees, his own version of crowd sourcing. As he explained, “If you don’t put them to work, they’ll surely put you to work.”

“BAD PREACHING CAN BE FORGIVEN IF YOU KNOW THE PREACHER LOVES YOU.”

Finally, the heads stressed one key behavior for a successful transition: a head must love and engage his culture. Every transition brings with it great expectations, challenges, misunderstandings, and wounded egos. A head that approaches his role with empathy, humility, and a willingness to listen and learn stands a far better chance of gaining his team’s trust, confidence, and affection. As one head shared, “If you treat people fairly and with respect, it’s remarkable what they in turn will do for you.”

Head of School Transition Planning

The following is offered as a template for some of the items to be considered as part of the transition planning. This list is by no means exhaustive - nor is it appropriate in all cases. It is meant merely as a starting point to begin to frame some of the conversations.

For the Outgoing Head

Around 14-18 months in advance of retirement, head shares decision with board chair.

For the Board

- With or without help of search firm, board gathers information and resources to help define characteristics of ideal candidate.
- Board undergoes process to assess viability of internal candidates.
- Employs search firm with instructions to engage community in order to understand school, mission, culture, and climate.
- Establishes three separate committees, whose members should include parents, faculty (teaching and/or administrative), and other trustees.
- Search committee: selects chair from board of trustees, outlines evaluation process of candidates, determines communication timeline to community.
- Celebration committee: plans appropriate measures to honor service of outgoing head.
- Transition committee: develops 1 to 2 year plan to assist incoming head's acculturation into community.

Incoming Head Transition Plan

Phase One (Initial appointment – June)

- Announce new head to board, faculty, staff, students, and parents.
- Announcement to media and accreditation/membership organizations via press release.
- Plan opportunities for new head to meet with board and leadership team, and to greet faculty, staff, students, and parents.

Phase Two (June – August)

- Provide hospitality assistance: help with move, dinners, babysitters, housekeeping and landscape services.
- Make community connections with leadership groups, other school heads, and cultural attractions.
- Provide head with cultivated materials helpful in educating about the school community: board by-laws, board minutes from past meetings, school financial plan, master plan, admission statistics, organizational chart, leadership team job descriptions including professional growth plan, school emergency manual, employee handbook, current yearbook, and family directory.

Phase Three (First two years)

- Develop comprehensive induction/support program.
- Engage in ongoing board training.
- Continue acculturation process for head and family.

For the New Head

- Meet with as many staff and faculty members as possible to listen and learn.
- Develop a small advisory team of influence leaders within community to act as “risk-free” sounding board.
- Engage with administrative team to review and discuss individual professional growth plans.
- Establish a mentoring relationship with retired or present heads of school.

Growing Administrative Talent

A Case for an Increase in Internal Successions to Head of School

by: Steve Robinson, SAIS

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The ratio of external placements to internal placements in the hiring of new heads of school is drastically out of proportion. Instead of a majority of schools hiring the new head from outside of its community, it is my belief that the majority of new head hires should come from within the school. Indeed the search consultants, with whom I am acquainted, appear to have noble intentions in their service to schools and they appear to approach their task as true professionals. However, it is the belief of many independent school leaders, as it is my personal belief that the proportion of new independent school heads hired from external searches is out of balance.



When an independent school undergoes a change in head of school, there is immense pressure on the board to conduct a national search. The head search industry, as it exists today, is benefitted by national searches and short-term placements. There is an implicit, if not explicit, message conveyed that a school only maintains respect in the independent school world if a national search is undertaken. Boards are often left with the impression that their school will be slighted if they do not conduct an external search.

Boards are encouraged to believe that the perfect candidate for the position is somewhere outside of the school; a grass is always

greener mentality. This is not only erroneous, it could imply that the school has not considered its full range of options for succession planning and has not appropriately engaged in developing the talent of its own administrators. For this reason, independent school boards should seek advice from a wide array of sources and listen to voices, in addition to search consultants, when determining whether or not a national search is in order for their school.

Large corporations routinely have leaders within the ranks of the management team that could assume the reigns of executive leadership, if necessary, without a drastic change or disruption to the organization. Over sixty percent of Fortune 1,000 companies CEOs were hired from within the organization and this percentage is perceived by many in the corporate world to be lower than desirable.⁽¹⁾ Likewise, having a talent-deep administrative team, from which the new head of school might come, provides confidence to the school community and will convey that the board is concerned about the continuity of mission and long-term sustainability of the school.

The interview and search process should be handled differently when an internal candidate is being considered. Prior to undertaking a national search, the board should first conduct a thorough review of any internal candidates and make a decision of whether or not the candidate will be offered the position. A consultant can help guide the evaluation and review of the internal candidate; however, this consultant should agree not to undertake the external search in the event that the internal candidate is not hired. This agreement will eliminate a major conflict of interest for the consultant since a contract for a national search is not possible if the internal candidate is not hired. The consultant retained for the purpose of evaluating the readiness of an internal candidate should be solely focused on that task.

It also is important not to engage in just one search process when an internal candidate competes with external candidates. When

a strong internal candidate is included in the candidate pool of a national search, it poses at least three problems. First, there is an inherent difficulty with maintaining a similar and impartial process for internal and external candidates. The internal candidate is already known by and knows the community and therefore shouldn't be vetted using the same methods appropriate for unknown external candidates.

The second problem occurs from the tendency of good external candidates to be more hesitant to apply for a position when they know that an internal candidate is in the pool. The perception by potential external candidates is frequently an assumption that an internal candidate has a distinct advantage and the search is merely an exercise of due diligence.

A third problem arises when an internal candidate is included in the same search pool as external candidates in that it creates a greater potential for the internal candidate to be embarrassed or humiliated if not offered the job. Additionally, this process often strains the relationship between the new head and the internal candidate that often leads to the internal candidate moving to another school; thus, the loss of one who is often a valuable asset to the school. Although a separate process does not guarantee that an internal candidate will remain at the school, it does provide more opportunity to "save face" if not publicly or specifically rejected in a head-to-head competition.

The current state of independent school head searches in some ways undermines our goals as independent schools. The way searches are handled places too little value on continuity of leadership and cultural fit and perpetuates the message to strong administrators that they will need to move out to move up. Independent schools have an opportunity to grow talent from within and should view talent development for administrators and teachers as one of the primary methods to sustain and perpetuate the mission of the school. We lose an opportunity to foster the

intense loyalty to the school that is usually developed with long-term tenure.

Without a doubt, there are times when a new head should come from outside of the school community. When the board seeks to change directions or undertake a drastic overhaul of the school or when the school needs to recover and heal from a disruptive head or traumatic event, it is often useful for the new head to bring to the school a fresh perspective. Also, when a potential successor exists within school, there will be times when it is clear that person is not sufficiently prepared to become the next head of school. Yet when this is the case the determination can and should take place outside of and prior to a national search.

To some this may seem like a radical idea. However, when considering the value of a highly qualified administrative team and leadership that is steeped in the culture and mores of the school, it is not radical at all. It is my hope that schools will be more intentional in the professional development of its administrative team and that more strong candidates for head of school positions will come from within. It is also my hope that in the future the first question asked by a board of trustees is which of our talented administrative team should be considered for the head position, rather than the first question being which search firm do we hire for a national search. National searches will still be an important activity within the independent school community but it is my belief that there should be considerably fewer than presently occur.

Perhaps a new model of search consultant will emerge to supplement the current industry; those who specialize in assisting schools with the assessment of internal candidates while not undertaking national searches. Consultants whose success is measured not in how many placements they have done or in how many candidates they have in their stable, but rather in how long each placement has thrived.

Additional steps to consider:

The first step in any succession-planning endeavor is a full examination of the cultural values of the school, the congruence of mission with all aspects of school life, and tone and tenor of the school community. It is important that boards engage in a regular process to assess the opinions and input of stakeholders in reliable and meaningful ways so that the board is able to listen to many voices and not just the loud voices. This is both a best practice and a basic tenet of good governance. Understanding the culture and values of the school will allow the board to build a profile of desired characteristics, personal traits, and professional credentials for its next head of school.

The second step for the board and the community is to understand the direction it is headed. What are the strategic visions for the school in the next 5-15 years that will help the school continue to fulfill its mission with the next generation of stakeholders? Understanding the strategic visions for the school will allow the board to build a profile of desired competencies and skill sets for its next head of school.

All too often searches focus more narrowly on finding the right person for the second step rather than someone who is the right person for the culture and the community of the school. Too often boards incorrectly assume that the second is the more important of the two.

When boards are inclusive of the entire school community, then they have successfully answered the questions and they have built a snapshot of the next head of school. This snapshot includes characteristics, personal traits, professional credentials, competencies, and skill sets. Now, as a board charged with the continuity of mission and succession planning, they are ready to search.

References: 1. Charan, R. (February, 2005). Ending the CEO Succession Crisis. *Harvard Business Review*.

SAIS Heads of School in their own words

THE OUTGOING HEAD

- "Timing is everything."
- "Organization is the best facilitator of freedom."
- "Adjust sails from time to time but focus on Ithaca."
- "Service is the strength of a school."
- "The truth is there is no role."
- "Don't come back unless invited."
- "You don't own the school, and it shouldn't own you."

THE BOARD

- "The board hires the head."
- "If someone wants to be board chair, they shouldn't be."
- "God on a good day."
- "Culture really does eat strategy for breakfast."

THE CANDIDATE

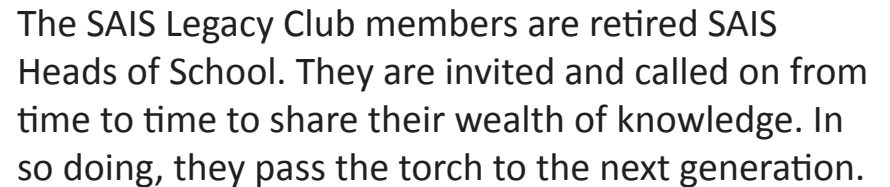
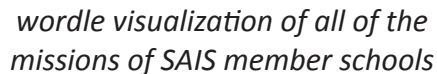
- "We have an exceptional leadership culture at our school."
- "Good people for short-term trump mediocre for long-term."
- "Better an interim than a sacrificial lamb."
- "What's your EQ?"

THE SEARCH FIRM

- "Leave a clean house."
- "What didn't they tell you?"

THE INCOMING HEAD

- "Who's looking out for the head?"
- "Wisdom in a multitude of counselors."
- "Bad preaching can be forgiven if you know the preacher loves you."



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opportunities to lead
saais.org/events

