

The Challenge of School Leadership

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By John Gulla

Schools are hearty organisms.

My quick online search turns up 44 independent schools that were founded in the US before 1800, 41 of which are still active and serving students. Worldwide, I can find about 150 secondary schools that were founded more than 500 years ago and are still open today. What other societal organizations display such stability? Certainly religious institutions endure. Colleges and universities have an even longer history than elementary and secondary schools. Some hospitals, museums, and banks have such institutional longevity. And I know of some hotels, breweries, and a number of businesses with equally ancient origins, but these are more the exceptions than the rule.

I don't believe, however, that once a school opens its doors it should remain in operation forever. But as anyone who has paid attention to the lives of schools will attest, there are emotional, not just economic, forces at work in the preservation of an educational institution. Think Hampshire or Sweet Briar colleges. In my on-the-road talks and presentations, I've argued that we are in the early stages of what I'm calling the "third great extinction" of independent schools.

The first was already underway in the early decades of the 20th century when the market crash of 1929 and ensuing prolonged depression shuttered a large number of private schools. During the second wave, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the very idea of independent schools was being



challenged, and the single-gender nature of many schools was (mistakenly) seen as an option that would soon lose market appeal. We are now in the third wave, with heightened competition from charters, microschoools, for-profits, online schools, and more. I'm confident we'll see continued compression and contraction in the world of nonpublic schools. It is already very evident in higher education.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of US postsecondary institutions crested in 2012–2013 at just over 7,200 and by 2018–2019 was down approximately 15% to fewer than 6,150. Will the fall-off ultimately be of the magnitude of the late Clayton Christensen's predicted disruption, which suggested some 50% of such institutions might close? I don't think so, but it will be significant. Right now, we are in the late stages of one of the most robust and prolonged economic expansions in our country's history. If enrollment is currently declining in many, if not most, markets, what will it look like in the midst of a recession? Just as this issue went to press, the coronavirus was starting to majorly impact the world and our schools, which will likely catalyze the challenges of this third wave of school extinctions.

There's a correlation, I think, and potential causation between sustained, continuous leadership of a school—heads and boards—and the success or health of the school. Although that mid-1990s bestseller *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* by Jim Collins didn't appeal to me as much as it did to others, the book's notion of a "clock builder" has always stuck with me: "Shaping a culture that can thrive beyond any single leader is clock-building." Thinking in the long term is a fundamental, maybe even primary, responsibility of all heads of school and boards.

Generations Ahead

I've visited more than 400 schools in my role with the Edward E. Ford Foundation, and as I attempt to get to know a school, I often look at historical enrollment. And as I have argued elsewhere, I see three broad buckets of independent schools. The first is bucket No. 1: secure; insulated by virtue of demand, resources, reputation, or some combination of all three. Bucket No. 2 schools are aware of the existential challenges of shrinking demographics, tuition increases that have outpaced the percentage of families who can pay, etc., and are attempting to address these challenges. And then there are bucket No. 3 schools that are mistakenly convinced that whatever challenges they are facing are temporary, and good times are just around the corner.

Bucket 3 schools often exemplify the most dangerous type of short-term thinking. They defer maintenance of school facilities. They artificially prop up enrollment by moving aggressively into discounted tuition, often making non-need-based "merit" financial aid awards. Bucket 3 schools ratchet down salary increases, if they give them at all, and benefit levels for employees. This is the behavior of a head and/or board that is focused on balancing next year's budget. But none of this helps unless these actions are part of a carefully crafted long-term plan.

It is imperative that heads and boards adapt the perspective that this is their school forever, that every decision they make they'll live with open-endedly. It is the job of heads and trustees to feel and operate as though they are long-term owners of the school, not renters. It is their job to think like they are a 30-year-old who has just bought the house they expect to inhabit for another 60 years.

They would like to remodel a bathroom, but they prioritize the leaky basement as the need. Thinking long term about personnel, about a disciplined endowment draw, about the fact that the true value of a school is not in the college acceptance list but the fullness of the lives lived by the students who've benefited from the influence of those at the school they came to know—this is the perspective heads and boards need.

Culture Stock

It can be difficult for heads and trustees to extend their gaze beyond the tips of their shoes given the lengths of time they serve in their roles.

For boards, the pattern for the modal years of service seems to be one three-year term, renewable once, with extensions possible for trustees holding officer positions. According to NAIS's recent [Factors Affecting Head of School Turnover \(FAHST\) survey](#), the average length of service of a head of school has been dropping recently from about nine years to about six. This means that, on average, on July 1, 2020, the head and the entire board of the average independent school will consist of entirely different people than those who held those roles in the school a decade earlier. Now I'm not making the case for a world of Frank Boydens, though his 60-year run as head of Deerfield Academy (MA) didn't poorly serve that school, but I do think there is a sweet spot for head tenure that probably ranges from about 10 to 15 or so years.

There is a general trajectory to most headships. Year one is an all-out sprint to get the community to know the new head, to get the carpool commentary and general community buzz to be positive. If a new head is fortunate, there will be no divisive issue or external emergency that will derail the good efforts of a transition team setting the new leader up for success. Years two to three (and maybe longer) can be the consolidation of a new leader's reputation and solidification of a set of relationships. In years four to seven, heads—in conjunction with the board, administrative leadership team, faculty, parents, students, alumni, and larger community—can begin to effectively weave their vision for the school into a coherent long-term plan. In year eight (or 10 or so), at the first board meeting of a year, a head might look around the board table and realize no one continues to serve on the board who'd been present when it had first offered the head the job. This is a point of inflection. Heads can now begin to spend accumulated leadership capital.

It is critical that heads never begin to think of the school as solely theirs, but this is not inconsistent with having a long-term plan that can come with that perspective of "ownership." All heads of school should be thinking open-endedly about the school. They should have, even if it exists only in their minds, a five-, 10-, and 20-year plan. I know that there is a necessary role for an interim head in some circumstances, and I know that many schools have been well-served by heads who have led for only five to seven years, but I generally think that any head accepting the offer to lead a school should approach the job with that open-minded, long-term perspective.

There's a lot of guidance in the governance area that suggests that term limits for board members are critically important—and I can't mount a strong counterargument. But I have seen schools benefit tremendously from effective, generous, wise, and committed board members who have served the school for much longer than two three-year terms. Maybe there weren't term limits in

their schools' bylaws. Maybe they rotated off for a year and returned. Maybe they served once when their children were enrolled and again 15 years later when their grandchildren were students. That inescapable maxim "no one size fits all" applies to board bylaws as well.

Still, it is essential that board members stop thinking about the school from the perspective of just their term of service or from the perspective of their own children. They hold the open-ended future of the school in trust. A school can hit its stride only when the board, in partnership with the head, can harmonize in aligning vision, capital generation, priority alignment, thoughtful asset allocation, and reliable implementation of a community-informed plan.

Sure, there are metrics we know are important. Schools have to live within their means by spending no more than the revenue they generate annually. The attrition rate should be low. The satisfaction levels of constituents should be high. But the culture of the community is its most valuable asset, and I believe that culture is vulnerable when there is a revolving door in the head's office or when there has been a mass resignation from the board. The culture is strongest when it has been carefully cultivated by a board and head working in steady partnership over an extended period of time. For all of the fixation in the independent school world on "sustainability," I think one of the most overlooked elements is this benefit of long-term thinking coming from a steady, enduring leadership team of long-serving heads and their boards.

Foundational Work

The E.E. Ford Foundation has recently undertaken a comprehensive examination of the challenges of leadership in independent schools. It has not been specifically focused on the longevity of heads of school nor on the duration of the average board members terms of service, but rather on the larger questions of leadership. We've been coordinating with others, including NAIS, and have taken a great interest in its FAHST study with the University of Pennsylvania.

More precisely, the foundation has already begun to invest in supporting models of "coaching" for heads of school, something we see as distinct from mentoring. We are interested in the role of consultants in the head of school search process, with a particular eye toward data that may be comprehensively gathered and readily made available to those looking to select a consultant. We've had discussions about what might be developed as a set of "principles of good practice" for head searches that might be promulgated and how compliance with such principles could be encouraged or required. We have had some animated conversations with many in the independent school world about the potential roles for 501(c)(3) organizations in these (coaching, search, etc.) areas of independent school work.

I wrote this article long before the COVID-19 crisis arose, but I'm reviewing the piece in mid-March when so much seems to be shifting at a dizzying speed. Yet all that is happening reaffirms the importance of good governance for our schools, the primacy of a partnership (no secrets!) between the board chair and the head of school, and the value of taking the long view. The challenges for bucket 2 and bucket 3 schools have certainly been heightened but so have the opportunities.

E.E. Ford News

E.E. Ford grants awarded from November 2018 through November 2019

Educational Leadership Grants

(Awards up to \$250,000)

March 2019

Greenwich Academy (CT)

‘Iolani School (HI)

Millbrook School (NY)

The Ethel Walker School (CT)

The Seven Hills School (OH)

Waynflete School (ME)

November 2019

San Francisco University High School (CA)

St. Andrew’s Episcopal School (MD)

The Nightingale-Bamford School (NY)

Traditional Grants

(Awards up to \$100,000)

June 2019

AIM Academy (PA)

Hackley School (NY)

Hathaway Brown School (OH)

John Bapst Memorial High School (ME)

Klingenstein Center, Teachers College,

Columbia University (NY)

New Roads School (CA)

Santa Fe Prep (NM)

The Browning School (NY)

The Gunnery (CT)

The Woodstock Academy (CT)

United World College USA (NM)

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