



Management Consulting to Independent  
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## PROTECTING OUR SCHOOLS THROUGH STRATEGIC PLANNING

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One of the key principles in healthy governance is: "Management manages and boards govern." The NAIS Principles of Good Practice for Boards state: "Trustees do not become involved in specific management, curriculum or personnel issues." Recently at a Littleford & Associates workshop on board governance, a trustee responded to this statement by protesting, "But that is all the fun stuff!" Indeed, sometimes boards become entrapped in the internal "fun" stuff and lose sight of the external "powerful" stuff. The latter forms the strategic issues that will determine whether the school survives and thrives, or falters and fails.

What are those strategic issues? Schools have focused consistently on funding new buildings, improving technology, and increasing endowment. However, the real strategic issues go beyond these classic (but still important) goals to include:

1. Using a few key words to establish **mission clarity** that resonates with all crucial constituencies. They form the core statement defining the school's unique character and the starting point for all planning.
2. Providing protection to schools by ensuring a strong foundation of healthy governance through the careful work of the committee on trustees that guarantees **institutional memory** on the board and the longevity of service of effective heads.
3. Developing a strategic long range **financial plan** that will guide how money is raised and spent to enhance and preserve the mission. This involves examining the trade offs in financial management.
4. Acquiring appropriate understandings of potential future political, economic and legal challenges and **designing contingency plans** to meet them.
5. Providing for healthy faculty cultures, the heart and soul of our schools, includes designing a **salary philosophy, salary system and evaluation plan** that meets the strategic needs and mission and guarantees schools the ability to attract, retain and reward those who most reflect that mission.
6. Developing a **communications and marketing plan** that attracts and retains students and



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- builds parent and alumni trust** in and support for the school. This includes knowing how to avoid "attacks" by constituents and when they do occur, how to address them.
7. Ensuring that management is discussing innovative educational programs and **centers of excellence** that reflect mission and history yet convey relevance to the future. Here there can be an important tie in of the strategic plan to self study and accreditation.
  8. Planning for **risk management** ranging from ensuring physical security for children at school; dealing with contagious disease; handling a scandal; reviewing policies regarding sexual harassment; and addressing school attitudes towards alternative lifestyles.
  9. **Avoiding financial and other conflicts of interest**, especially on the Board but even within the faculty and staff.

Ignoring these strategic issues may undermine fundraising for important long range needs.

1. **One Example of Clarifying the Mission** was a head's invitation to 25 selected community leaders, students, parents, past parents, faculty, administration and the Board to participate in a strategic planning retreat led by Littleford & Associates. This represents the "broad based" approach and is one way to do this exercise. The other is "focused planning" that can provide important linkages to the accreditation process. Littleford & Associates interviewed separate focus groups of board, students, faculty, parents and community leaders in one hour feedback sessions to seek insights as to strategic challenges, opportunities, threats, priorities, and risks. A three hour workshop for all 25 participants followed. It began with "word development" on mission. Each participant was asked to write down three words that most accurately and passionately conveyed the School's mission. Those words were placed on flip charts. Each person then voted for the top three words on the flipchart. Five focus groups, each with a cross section of participants, then used the words with the highest votes to formulate a mission phrase that would accurately reflect the past, honestly convey the present and apply to the future. The group was asked further to formulate a phrase or acronym that would be memorable for any student, parent or teacher and could have a "story" related to each.

The five groups presented their ideas and voted that the best word representing this residential school for troubled boys was "SHAPES". "Our School SHAPES the boy by providing a:

**Safe and Supportive Environment**

**Hope for his future**

**Advocacy for his needs**

**Preparation and education for life long learning**



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**Empowerment and assurance of some**

**Success in his life."**

Not only was the acronym memorable, but the words were powerfully accurate and generated excitement.

A similar process was followed for giving feedback on the 42 possible challenges listed by the focus groups. Through discussions, votes, and filtering, they agreed upon and ranked five key strategic challenges and decided upon the timeline for implementation. They formed committees and planned meetings to generate 4-6 action plans for each of the five challenges. The process was empowering, and the enthusiasm created was palpable and refreshing.

- 2. Protecting Schools by Ensuring a Foundation of Healthy Board Governance**, through effective functioning of the Committee on Trustees and the preservation of a healthy board/head partnership, is among the most important topics in the pantheon of strategic planning needs for all schools. Previously, we have addressed the seven areas of focus of this committee: cultivating, screening and inviting prospects, and orientating, training, evaluating, warning and if necessary, removing trustees. The resulting healthy board is a policymaking entity composed of members who do not pursue shortsighted personal agendas. Boards need a deep familiarity with the principles of good governance and the importance of retaining the head of school whenever possible. The board should sponsor an annual retreat to review the progress of governance and the strategic plan. The boards that claim they do not need such annual governance reviews are often the same ones that "trip" over an issue, fire their heads and/or precipitate a crisis.

Real board development and training is a delicate process that involves a dialogue, discussion of substantive issues and objective feedback that seldom can be accomplished solely through the use of questionnaires.

A client had a board member with close ties to a long term faculty member and former classmate. Feeling that this teacher was underpaid, he asked to see individual salaries for all teachers.

The Head declined, with the Board's support. The board member then asked the state's attorney general's office to intervene and threatened a lawsuit against the School unless the information was forthcoming. The trustee finally admitted that he disagreed with the Board's recent positive evaluation of the Head and felt he should be dismissed. Absent the ability to achieve that goal, he pressed on other fronts where he and the Head had clashed, including this salary issue. This individual cost the School energy, focus, time, and money for eighteen



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months until he was finally persuaded to resign. The pursuit of a personal agenda derailed this board from focusing on strategic goals.

- 3. Strategic Long Range Financial Plans** are five to ten, even twenty year, projections of all aspects of independent school issues. While twenty years may seem like a long horizon, there are modeling programs that offer tools to adjust, massage and monitor these numbers annually. Our Firm helps schools design these financial plans with an important added dimension: a focus on mission.

One recent client found that due to lack of business office oversight, and some overly aggressive annual giving projections and accounting practices, it had an annual deficit of three million dollars with a nine million dollar budget. The School was unable to meet the covenants on its bond debt. To complicate the situation, a new head and the Board learned of the budgetary crisis for the first time shortly after the head's arrival.

The School retained our Firm to recommend corrective measures that included cutting expenses, improving efficiency, raising more funds, increasing enrollment modestly and generating more revenue from profit centers. We added a crucial dimension to this assignment: When faced with a range of potential major cuts, how does a School retain institutional culture and faculty morale? How does it convey a sense of health (versus anxiety and fear of change) to prospective parents and students? The School utilizes its strengths such as a strong board chair/head partnership, a rich history and unique school culture. Mission clarity and sensitivity to history and tradition are central to controlling costs, balancing budgets, and returning to fiscal health

- 4. Ensuring Appropriate Understanding of Potential Legal, Financial and Political Challenges** is one of our weakest areas of planning in independent schools. We are highly reactive to events. Examples of this are the increased frequency and intensity of focused angry parent, faculty or alumni reactions to school or board decisions or policies, even when the reason for the policy or decision is clear and serves the school's best interests. Our 2002 Newsletter entitled: "Fortress Head, Fortress School: Attacks from Within and Attacks from Without." describes how such events unfold and how to address them. This article was one of our most requested from around the world.

Another example is the vulnerability of a school to a lawsuit as a result of not admitting or retaining certain children even if the school can demonstrate that it lacks the structure, staff, mission or tools to meet their needs successfully. After unusual efforts and support, a client school felt that a child could not succeed and graduate without compromising the integrity of its diploma. Even when the court ruled in the school's favor, public opinion was divided. A board member "crossed a boundary" by throwing his personal support behind the student.



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Another school was confronted by an alumnus who claimed a teacher long since departed had molested him sexually. Unhappy with the School's response to him, he filed a law suit. When the newspapers reported the story, other alumni made similar claims about the lack of school oversight of this teacher. The current head responded with dignity to alumni anger and hurt. Nonetheless, the School was still beset by a series of unfavorable newspaper articles. The School had resources, reputation and power on its side and yet, was battered consistently for three years. We know of seven great independent schools worldwide where a similar situation has occurred within the past five years.

Plans are needed for preventing such events and outlining their proper handling and the nature and mode of reporting them if they do occur. Clear boundaries need to be set, however, relating to the board's versus the administration's role here.

5. **Providing Healthy Faculty Cultures** is truly the heart and soul of our schools. All parents hope for that special independent school teacher who may be a mentor, advisor, coach and friend to their child. However, many of our faculty cultures are under stress. Tension between administration and faculty is common, even though seldom acknowledged publicly. Knowing how to build and maintain faculty cultures, where faculty are responsive to legitimate parent demands, but protected from overbearing ones, is a crucial element of any strategic plan. It only takes five seriously unhappy teachers in a faculty of fifty to undermine a positive school environment. Schools can assess and help turn around a school culture by "engaging teachers and administrators in deep reflection, clarifying their thoughts, actions and language and thereby helping schools to move beyond symbol and rhetoric to real strategic issues." (Quote from a recent client).

Another school has a unique niche in serving gifted students. It lacks the green space and impressive facilities of many of our independent schools. Yet this consultant found high parent satisfaction and a very professional unified (and modestly compensated) faculty which has created a learning environment where children feel academically challenged, emotionally safe and socially comfortable. Why?

Faculty culture in this school was healthy due at least in part to strong leadership by the head, her careful hiring for "mission", and a strong and committed faculty who like and trust each other and their head and believe deeply in the mission of gifted education.

6. **Developing an Effective Communications Plan** for the community at large is essential. Vehicles of written and oral communication should be examined. Large public or town forum meetings for open discussion of grievances are usually NOT productive and can turn adversarial very quickly. On the other hand, discussions in parent homes in small grade level



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groups with key teachers, board members and administrators have proven to be a much more effective means of generating healthy dialogue and building bridges.

Building a trusting relationship with the local media will help to manage a story or issue that may be misrepresented because of a complete lack of knowledge of the school's mission and goals and the facts surrounding an incident.

Another recent client handled a media event in a positive and a politically savvy way. When students were penalized for using drugs on a school sponsored field trip, the School communicated with the local reporter about its firm disciplinary stance and the high moral road the School chose. A few involved parents had contacted the same newspaper to try to undercut and challenge the School. The newspaper chose to highlight the School's position and the lesson for all. Community respect for the School rose.

7. **Ensuring that Management Is Discussing Cutting Edge Educational Programs and Centers of Excellence** does not mean that the Board should micromanage the very area which the head and professional staff were hired to lead. Rather, it means that boards have a responsibility to raise appropriate questions as to larger "educational issues", patterns and trends. Management has the responsibility to discuss with trustees how new and creative approaches to program keep the mission directed towards the future as well as grounded in tradition.

An ideal opportunity to launch a strategic planning process is when the school is undertaking a self study toward accreditation. The two processes go hand in hand and support one another.

Curriculum for the future must go even further than serving each child's unique needs, preparing them better and prompting them to think more critically. We have struggled to introduce collaborative learning in schools where teachers do not even visit each others' classrooms out of "discomfort" or fear of invading a peer's turf.

Real cutting edge learning must examine how faculty cultures become ones where self reflection and honest evaluation by peers and administration are a daily element of enhancing the collegial dialogue. Effective evaluation does not destroy but supports real collegiality and is not simply "peer review", "portfolio sharing", "goal setting" or "professional growth".

Littleford & Associates has helped over 700 schools implement evaluation systems that make teachers feel valued, accountable, and supported while providing the meaningful feedback that all teachers need to improve.

Designing an evaluation process is the management's responsibility. Ensuring that such a system IS in place is a board responsibility.



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## 8. **Risk Management Requires that the Board and Administration Anticipate and be Prepared to address "Unlikely" Possibilities.**

In one week a school experienced a bomb scare, a tragedy involving a faculty child and the death of a student from contagious meningitis. Any one of these events could have been a major crisis. Yet the head and board worked cooperatively each time to defuse panic, sadness and fear, resulting in community bonding and stronger communications. The appropriate calm response to each incident was based upon the trust that the chair and head had in each other. They could then command broader support and engage everyone on a range of levels in implementing plans already in place for handling a medical emergency and school wide trauma.

## 9. **Avoiding Real or Perceived Conflict of Interest**

Insurance agents, architects, psychologists, attorneys whose firms represent the school or any other vendor should not serve on the board of an independent school, immediately before, during and right after providing any PAID service to the school. Violating this rule can invite a crisis, a lawsuit or a loss of community credibility in the integrity of the board and thus the school.

In one case, a board member whose company insured the School was sued by the Board when the school building developed cracks, and the insurance company refused to provide replacement coverage, citing a little known provision in the policy.

**The average tenure of school heads is about 5.5 years and the average length of trustee service is 3.5 years. Due to these patterns, there need to be more "touchstones" of approved and understood tools to retain mission integrity and protect the school from a crisis. The strategic plan helps to ensure this. Simultaneously, we must improve governance practices to define boundaries of authority and to extend the tenure for heads, board chairs and board members.**

The strategic planning process should not be a mechanistic uniform checklist of "do's" and "don'ts" but rather a discussion about how to maximize the opportunities and minimize the risks facing the school. Littleford & Associates uses strategic planning ("broad brush" or "focused") to engage participants in an enthusiastic and thoughtful dialogue centered on the unique mission of each school while retaining the ultimate decision making authority in the board of trustees.

John Littleford  
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