



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

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THE ENTRY CHALLENGE

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When new heads are hired from the outside, boards often give them very ambitious goals. Boards are excited for change, but overly ambitious goals usually mean anticipated changes that will eat up political goodwill before the new head has actually earned any.

This is a particular risk when the board feels the school is financially stressed; enrollment is not strong enough; costs have run out of control, and/or debt is burdensome. The new head is expected to pare the budget but not to upset the culture while doing so. That is almost an impossible task and the head put into that scenario might become the “sacrificial lamb”.

Heads need to do a far better job of assessing the challenge of the new position and probing for honesty with the board to ensure that the board spells out these challenges in the search process. Of course, board search committees do not always want to be too honest about the stress points for fear of losing top notch candidates, and potential candidates do not want to take themselves out of the running.

Even outwardly healthy schools may be facing issues of long-term financial sustainability. Perhaps they took on too much debt and built new facilities without carefully assessing marketplace demand. Some schools in moderate size cities have relied heavily on alumni children and those living close to the school and have not expanded the school’s “footprint” beyond traditional audiences or locations. Thus, their brand recognition is narrow in scope.

The same holds true for traditional, nonprofit expat-style international schools that are feeling the competition from for-profit and privately owned schools that have entered the marketplace focusing on local populations. These schools might charge a slightly lower tuition and still offer a strong enough product.

One recent client faced a plethora of challenges upon the arrival of a new Head, and a first-time head as well. Local competition from charter schools, Christian schools and good magnet public schools had undercut the school’s traditional base and support within a narrow geographic area. The challenges were a declining enrollment, a staid long-term faculty not very open to change, some buildings needing major renovations and class sizes that were far too low to sustain.



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This new Head needed to tackle all these issues in a manner that proposed possible solutions, but the proposed solutions could not overly upset the faculty culture. Unhappy teachers might reach out to parents and parent board members to undercut the Head who was only doing exactly what the board asked him to do. This is a fairly common dilemma. We have also seen this scenario in expat dominated international schools where, for example, a local devaluation against the dollar might cause a drop in enrollment. Faculty become upset about potential cuts, and a new head is hired to come in and “right” the ship”. Often these heads do a great job of understanding these threats and undertaking appropriate changes but usually these heads last only 3 to 5 years before they feel it is necessary to move on or frankly, their boards nudge them out.

When boards do ask these challenging tasks of a new head, they would be well advised to keep in mind that a storm of some kind will arise among the stakeholder groups. In that case, if they want this new head to succeed and the Board needs to keep three things in mind when stakeholders protest: “Circle the wagons; shut up; and support your head.” That means do not break ranks, do not break confidences and do not undermine your head at the very moment when you most need that person to succeed.