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THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON MISSION AND GOVERNANCE

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Enrollment challenges for certain schools in specific environments have always been there. Some fortunate few are located in major metro areas with high demand for independent and international schools, i.e., a seller's market for these top notch schools. But many international and independent schools are in a buyer's market, and these schools are even more financially vulnerable during these times because they need to differentiate themselves even more from the competition.

In the early 1970's many single sex schools in the US went coed just to survive. Most of the girls' schools were absorbed by the boys' schools although some single sex schools held true to their mission and have thrived to this day, albeit they are in a much smaller set of single sex schools.

The recession of 2008-2010 caused many schools in the US to assess their curriculum, their diploma programs, their schedules and even their core mission, in order to ensure their ability to survive in the short run and be financially viable in the long run. Most were selling a cost/benefit value that included a heavy dose of small class size, close faculty/student relationships, emphasis on community, and a focus on inclusion and differentiation in the delivery of learning

However, in more recent history nothing has so shaken the core educational and business model of both public and private schools and colleges than a virus that at this time has no proven cure or vaccine and that could have a sharp reoccurrence at any time. What if distance learning is the modus operandi for the immediate future as well as the way that students of all ages interact through sports activities, clubs, friendships, networking and class assignments, perhaps for longer than we had expected? This is prompting schools to reevaluate their cost/benefit ratio, i.e., their value proposition.

These challenges will affect some schools' mission. Many of our client schools are struggling to ensure enrollment health. This may mean changing enrollment and recruitment strategies, core programming, scheduling, staffing patterns, and financial priorities and yes, even the mission itself in order to remain relevant and competitive. Some schools who were already at risk may be struggling to survive.



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Ultimately there is nothing new in revisiting a mission. It tends to happen every decade or so in our experience, although the Covid 19 impact may have a larger faster impact on mission relevance than any other recent event.

In the midst of all of this, healthy governance is under stress, even under attack. Heads are expected to lead, to see the problems over the hill, to prepare for economic and demographic shifts, as well as scarcity in the marketplace for mission appropriate families. What does the head do? Change the definition of “mission appropriate” students? Change the core demographic of the students being recruited? Stick to an academically focused mission or focus on inclusion as not only politically correct but possibly leading to a larger potential recruitment pool than a narrow focus on the more gifted academically? And bottom line, we need those families who can afford the tuition, even when it reaches \$75,000 for boarding schools and as high as \$60,000 for some day schools.

Need-based financial aid depends on endowment. Endowments have taken a market hit. Just like stores in a shopping mall, financial stress may weed out a number of independent and international schools. That is unless heads can be entrepreneurially nimble enough to balance the clout of a school’s history and mission with the reality of a changing world. In the midst of providing this leadership heads may find themselves coming face to face with boards that feel undermined and not consulted while the head tries to keep the ship afloat, but at what price? The head may not “win” in whatever direction he or she goes.

The Pandemic has threatened the mission as it has threatened financial survival. That has caused the board /head relationship to become frayed in many schools. Heads have to recommend a course of action to protect staff, program, student safety, and yet still meet parental expectations. They must ensure a tuition structure that keeps the school healthy, honors the mission and still garners the support of the board. How to do that? Is that even possible?

That is Possible ONLY IF the board confronts and faces honestly the core inconsistency here, the core dilemma: that necessity is the mother of invention. Invention sometimes means recasting ourselves, re interpreting the mission to enable it to be relevant in changing times. That can cause a head to be mistrusted, disliked and undercut often by the most passionate parents and especially alumni, who may feel the core essence of the school is being compromised.

That brings us back to healthy board governance and the absolute necessity of regular board training in the principles of best practice. That is one of the responsibilities of Committee on Trustees (Nominating Committee). That also brings us back to the critical role of this Committee in screening candidates for the board and retaining valued members. At this time, boards do not need or want members who will tend to micromanage the head. However, boards do need to keep and



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appreciate wise trustees even though they may be feeling exhausted or stressed in their role now.