



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

THE VALUE OF AGE INDUCED WISDOM

Posted on August 1, 2015

A well-known consultant wrote an article on the topic of head turnover about twenty years ago. He suggested that twelve years was a good limit for a school head's tenure. Perhaps not coincidentally, that year this consultant heard from heads of school with about that length of service that their boards had "fired" them.

There is no particular or mandated retirement age for a head of school and no specific age when he or she is presumed to have less energy, commitment, dedication, drive or a diminished capacity for inspired leadership. In fact the longer the head's tenure the greater the strength and health of the school and the more clear and consistent are its vision. This assumes of course that the head is being evaluated annually in a thoughtful manner and that he or she remains in good mental and physical health.

Many heads between 50 and 65 years of age want and need to keep working and should have that opportunity both for themselves and for our schools which can continue to benefit from their wisdom and experience. It is interesting to note that in many other professions a person of 50 to 65 years of age is considered "at the top of his or her game" whereas in the independent school world such an individual may be perceived often as having peaked and on the decline.

Long term heads ensure the consistency of the mission; long term heads hire staff who will support the core definition of the mission and the vision; long term heads raise more money because they know where the money is buried. Successful long term heads build alumni loyalty. Short term heads usually leave power vacuums for boards, faculty and constituents to fill. Short term heads are a product of the loss of institutional memory on boards when no one remembers why the head was hired.

1. An Interesting (If Not Much Talked About) Pattern.

Which city in the US has the longest serving heads and why? That is Los Angeles. There are more heads in the LA area with 10 to 20 year tenures than in any other single region of the US. California in general has longer serving heads than any other State, though less so than Los Angeles. This consultant has over 75 California client schools and knows of several long-term Heads there (ten to



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

over twenty years) whose Boards do not entertain any thoughts of not extending their contracts. At these Schools, there is no talk of retirement or bringing in "new blood" unless the Head initiates the discussion.

1. Chair Power

Why is it that in a community, such as Los Angeles, with many ambitious assertive parents having wealth, influence, power (and often connections), do Heads serve longer rather than shorter terms? Why do these Chairs seem to defy the patterns which this consultant has observed consistently? These patterns are:

1. Elementary schools fire their heads more than twice as often as K-12 schools because their parent/board members are present more often on campus with an intense daily interest in the lives of their children. (This is the same reason why head turnover at day schools is twice that at boarding schools.)
2. Boards dominated by parents fire their heads more often than those comprised mostly of alumni. Parent dominated boards tend to demand change NOW while alumni (like teachers) are "conservers" of the status quo and more averse to change.

There is no proven answer to why LA and in general California-based school heads seem to outlast others nationwide but this consultant has a good guess: The length of service of the Board Chair AND the willingness of these Chairs to tell parents especially to "stand back" and not to yield to inappropriate constituent demands. Think about it. If Chairs of independent schools in Los Angeles did not know only too well the importance of protecting their Heads from the constant and powerful demands of well connected, influential parents, there would be a pattern there of head turnover every five years or less. Instead the opposite is the case. Perhaps also because the Chairs themselves "hold the base" and do not feel embattled constantly, they are willing to serve a minimum of three to four years, thereby helping to ensure the stability of leadership.

This is not to say that this consultant has not observed many exemplary board chairs elsewhere in the United States and internationally, but there appears to be a concentration of long-term chairs and heads at this time in California. When these headships become available they tend to be sought after highly in part because heads are attracted to those schools with a history of boards who value longevity and who are known for consistent "fair play".

Here is one extraordinary international example. A long-term successful and highly regarded head became terminally ill but because of his will to live, unflinching optimism and historically excellent health and stamina, he was not prepared to resign but simply to step aside temporarily. The Chair stood by him through two full years of absence due to his treatments elsewhere. The Chair agreed



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

finally to appoint an Interim but with no timetable to launch a search. The Chair named an Interim from the outside with the understanding by all parties that the Interim would not become the permanent Head of School. There was no commitment to launch a search until after the Head passed away and only then did the Chair "let go". He said to this consultant, "I will never take away from him the will to fight this illness to come back to his job."

The Board stood with the Chair throughout, a testimony to the legacy of the Head and the influence of the Chair.

Known to many worldwide, this is a story about the type of chair/head partnership that could and should be held high as a model for all schools. The School did not suffer but learned compassion while the Interim did a fine job. An excellent new head is on site. The Chair is ready to step down after leading the transition to ensure support and continuity for the new Head.

1. How Long is Too Long?

There is no set tenure for a school head, but the answer to this question from this consultant's perspective is, "It depends, but longer is better."

Five years is too short to build the political capital necessary to leave a lasting legacy. Twenty years MAY be too long in some cases but not necessarily at all. Will MacMullen, Headmaster of the Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut is that School's fifth Head in over 100 years. His well-known predecessor, Lance Odden, served in that capacity from 1972-2001. There are still a number of 20 plus year heads throughout the nation and in Canada Will Mitchell of Selwyn House School is retiring after 22 and 23 years of service.

Here follows excerpts from letters sent to me just recently by two different Heads. Our Firm receives several similar communications each summer, and they are all too representative of patterns in independent and international schools world wide today.

The first Head, a wise and respected leader of two independent schools for more than fifteen years writes:

"Last month, I resigned over philosophical differences with the new leadership of the Board revolving around governance and management issues. The Board wants to be involved actively in teacher evaluation and major disciplinary matters. Unable to agree with their views, I offered my resignation effective July 2008. The Board chose instead to buy out my contract with a full year's salary and benefits. The Executive Committee of the Board will oversee the School in the coming year."

At this School, only three of these trustees were on the Board when this Head was hired just a very



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

few years ago, and the Chair was named to that position after only one year of service. The Head cannot explain the process of Chair succession,

This is a prime example of how quickly an environment can change (and an experienced Head can be suddenly without a job) when there is drastic turnover of the board and its leadership. Many of our schools could benefit from this Head's experience and credentials, but it is too late now for her to be available for the upcoming school year.

The second Head tells this story:

"I was shocked by the non renewal of my contract after the board had told me what a great job I was doing just a few months ago in my last evaluation. In fact I walked away from that evaluation feeling that my efforts were well recognized." The fallout from the firing of this Head has been damaging and far-reaching: an upset parent body which has come forth with an outpouring of support; a very disappointed new Administrator who applied and accepted a position mainly because he wanted to work for this Head; a disillusioned key benefactor who may reconsider a pledge for a major gift for a new facility. The Board has sent out this general explanation: "The Head 'has done a wonderful job and the school is doing well', but a new Head of the same calibre as the present one is required to implement the 'subtle changes necessary to take the school to the next level'." Confused staff asked nervously about the precise nature of those "subtle changes" and about the meaning of that "next level." They also wondered obviously, "Why if we already have someone of the current Head's calibre do we need someone else?"

This Head writes further, "At age 59, I know I am vigorous, jog five miles every day, and am in great health. If prospective boards write me off (because of my age) it's a shame and their loss as well as mine. I am fitter, more energetic and more enthusiastic than most of my colleagues half my age." To add insult to injury, this Head has one year remaining on his contract, and as of this date nobody on the Board has broached with him the subject of compensation for next year, and there is no provision in next year's budget for this. (See the following article in this Newsletter on head compensation and contracts.)

1. Conclusion

I hear stories like this many times a year. There are some schools for which this Head (and others just like him) would be a perfect match and which would benefit greatly from his wisdom, experience and simple love of the profession. There is no set time for a school head to retire and no legitimate reason to "fire" him or her precipitously in order to bring in "new blood" when there are no documented issues of poor performance or evidence of failing health. Boards often forget the simple old adage, "The devil you know is better than the devil you don't."



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

On line statistics or surveys may not reveal what this consultant has repeatedly observed. The Boards most likely to act in the manner above are those who experience frequent turnover of Chairs and key trustees and who consistently fold under pressure from parents and other powerful and vocal constituent groups. These "fired" heads may have received recently an outstanding evaluation or at least one that did not suggest any serious concerns about performance.

Boards would do well to remember that short-term heads never quite get a "toe hold" as whichever group has filled the power vacuum created when the prior head left is reluctant to cede the power and influence it has attained. The new head is challenged to deliver on the often ambitious goals established for him or her and typically does not survive beyond five years. And so the unfortunate cycle begins again.

John Littleford
Senior Partner