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THE VIEW FROM 50,000 FEET: THE PERSPECTIVES OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS OF INDEPENDENT AND INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OF SCHOOLS

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Since Executive Directors of independent and international school associations hear of the problems and successes of all their member schools they have a unique and wide-ranging perspective. It is their job to foresee long term trends and help their members navigate sometimes choppy waters. Our Firm recently interviewed some of the top Executive Directors to hear their insights about the most compelling issues facing schools now and in the near future. This report summarizes their perspectives.

Governance

Richard Tangye of the Council of International Schools cited the underlying tension between the Board's need to provide oversight of the school and the Head's need to function effectively as CEO. Micromanagement by the Board remains the paramount challenge named by both Board Chairs and Heads as they reflect on the greatest barriers to successful school management. Rick Belding of ISACS in the US and Mary Virginia Sanchez of Tri Association in Latin America cited similar problems.

Belding receives reports of Board members being "down in the schools" on an almost daily basis. This can generate a long string of directives and demands on the Head which divert from the most strategically crucial priorities. The board members may be trying to contribute to the well-being of the school and do not realize the unintended negative impact of their actions. Many of these practices are occurring in the younger schools.

Other Executive Directors pointed to the ongoing problem of trustee spouses engaging in intrusive micro managing behavior relating to curriculum and personnel. Other trustees may be at least somewhat aware of the inappropriateness of such actions, but they are unwilling to confront their fellow trustees or the chair.

While these are not new issues, the fact that they are repeating worldwide, reinforces the need for a commitment to annual trustee orientation and training which addresses such problem areas, even



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for "experienced" trustees. Helping Board members sort between their own particularized interests and the long range health and balance of the school is not easy. It requires ongoing clear dialog about what constitutes "strategic" thinking and a commitment to rise above parochial concerns when the majority of a board calls a fellow trustee on his or her errant behavior. Even more challenging is establishing and implementing a system for disciplining misbehaving board members when such efforts fail.

Careful recruitment and selection of Board members also helps. As Rhonda James, Executive Director of ISAS, clearly stated, looking for Board members with wisdom rather than just a particular set of skills makes a huge difference in overall governance success.

Steve Clem of AISNE noted that Board members seem less understanding of their role in general, and in many instances question or actively object to their obligation to contribute financially to the school. The orientation of board chairs and members can also help communicate that fund raising and the importance of members contributing personally are necessary and legitimate functions of boards especially in the US and Canada. An outsider can often communicate this message more directly than a heads who can be perceived as pursuing a particular favorite project.

As we have previously written, the Committee on Trustees (called elsewhere the Governance or Policy or Nominating Committee) has eight critical functions which it seldom performs successfully or in full in many schools. However, Barbara Kraus-Blackney of ADVIS noted an excellent technique employed by some schools in her organization of counseling out difficult or underperforming Board members, while counseling in outstanding members.

PNAIS Director Meade Thayer believes that heads do not always understand or invest the time and energy it takes to develop their boards.

Proprietary Owners

The trend toward privately owned schools—whether held by individual owners, families or corporations—is a second sea change affecting a host of schools. Many of these schools are offering strong educational programs. Most of the growth here is in the Middle East and East Asia but it is occurring in most countries of the world with some major new "players" in the US coming onto the scene in the past few years.

However, these for profit schools do pose a fascinating challenge in trying to sculpt a system of checks and balances which respects the rights of all involved. The owners and/or companies expect a significant voice in how the school is run. They do, after all, have a huge stake in the outcome given that they are investing time, energy, reputation and money in the school. A traditional Board structure may feel to them that they are turning over too much power to a



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Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

potentially unwieldy or divisive entity. Tangye of CIS has been focusing particularly on developing appropriate oversight approaches.

PNAIS recently completed a major revision of standards and has created leadership guidelines for for-profit schools. Director Meade Thayer explained that their approach outlines both institutional structures and good practices. Their work might provide a helpful framework for others.

Yet, clearly if the schools are to be accredited, there must be a larger group responsible for oversight. Perhaps a "federalist" approach like a parliamentary system is one avenue which could be explored. Some schools are setting up Advisory Councils which can assist in decision making. Delineating their rights and responsibilities is obviously key to overall success, as with more traditional, board structures. Other associations are setting up two "classes" of membership: for profit and not for profit.

The growth of proprietary schools is a source of great concern to some Directors who do not wish to see the governance of their own organizations being dominated by the expansion of this for profit sector, especially as one family or corporation may have many "Schools" and therefore voting "units." Among US independent school Directors, there is a strong feeling against having such Schools in their membership. On the other hand, in some of the international associations as many as 40% to 50% of the membership is now coming from for profit schools, and they can no longer ignore their influence or their membership clout.

Head Shortage

A crucial problem facing all schools in the next few years is the shortage of able and willing Heads. Belding of ISACS noted that many current heads are in their mid 50's to 60's and will be retiring en masse within the next decade. It might be wise to begin surveying current faculty and grooming prospective heads sooner rather than later or seeking heads from alternative career patterns.

Most international school heads from the US have come from the role of principal and superintendent from the public school sector. Hiring heads to run international schools when they have had little prior international experience is a high risk strategy and results in frequent turnover of the Head which is destabilizing for the school. However, there is a pronounced effort now in many school searches on the international scene to seek out heads who have had at least some experience in either US, Canadian or UK independent schools.

David Cobb, of CEESA, finds that his heads are happy and stable and that the schools in what was formerly known as Eastern Europe have been successful in recruiting strong heads who are staying longer.



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Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

Recruiting Faculty

Dixie McKay of ECIS stated that the supply of well trained and experienced international teachers interested in working in international schools is currently in a decline. Other Directors echoed her sentiments and are actively working to overcome the trend.

Paul Poore, new Director of AASSA, reported excellent results for his schools from smaller association sponsored job fairs such as the one in December in Atlanta. The Fair was definitely helpful in their marketing outreach to prospective faculty, and the Schools were able to make some excellent hires.

Poore also noted an important current challenge for all international American schools. Given the difficult situation America faces vis-à-vis perceptions of its international policies, sensitivity is particularly important now for all American-affiliated schools and faculty. It might be wise to keep this particularly in mind for recruiting, training and guidance of Heads, Board members and faculty at this time.

According to David Cobb of CEESA, Eastern Europe is feeling the recruiting crunch even though faculty are enjoying their stays at his schools, the region and the quality of life, marrying into the local community and planning on staying long term. The crunch is due to economic conditions.

Corporate Models Applied to Schools

Steve Clem of AISNE noted that trustees often want to apply successful approaches to staff and executive compensation and strategic planning in the for profit sector to the independent school world under the assumption that such methods will work equally well and be widely embraced in a school culture. Other Directors reiterated a similar theme.

Performance pay for both heads and faculty is one example. In the corporate world, the bottom line provides rather clear quantifiable evidence of success or failure. But how does one create a fair measure of progress within schools? Enrollment increases? Standardized test scores? College admission rates? Diversification of the student body? Fund raising success? Management of crises?

Listing all of these on a "dashboard" may not result in clear focus or provide a meaningful measure of performance. Obviously the target that receives the greatest weight depends upon the particular mission and long-term goals of the school. There are examples of schools which have implemented successfully these performance models for teachers and administrators but only after bringing in outside consulting advice. Such advice is likely to be received better when it is not drawn primarily from the business sector where teachers react poorly to the heavily "corporate" slant.

Capturing such vital elements as "school morale", teacher creativity, willingness to "go the extra



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mile" and other such aspects are crucial to a school's functioning, but quite difficult to quantify. Therefore, it is not clear that, however well meant, the attempt to move measurement systems across sectors will have the desired outcomes. Clearly, such efforts must be taken on carefully and often by an outside consultant who becomes sensitized to the internal school culture before making any recommendations. The head of school must be protected, to some extent, by board members aggressively desiring to explore more performance oriented models, at times without a sensitivity to faculty cultures.

Board members concerned about the school pricing itself out of the market look to cost cutting measures like those employed by corporations. In schools, however, more of the costs are fixed and there is little flexibility to cut the cost structure, as ISACS' Belding points out. While Walmart can afford to keep employee wages low because there is a large supply of unskilled labor which will take the jobs, the same is not true of teachers. There is already a fierce competition for talent and trying to keep compensation increases moderate or trimming benefits too dramatically can create the very downward spiral the Board is trying to avoid.

Similarly, Board members sometimes lobby for bond financing and other forms of debt-financed growth. Many schools are carrying such bond debt on their books offset in part (and in some cases a very small part) by endowment raised during campaigns for the buildings. Overall endowment growth has slowed and returns are down in most schools.

EARCOS Executive Director Dick Krajczar noted that an aspect of corporate approaches which could in fact be helpful is the use of more sophisticated data collection and analysis techniques. Developing smart information management and decision support systems could indeed help heads gain a clearer picture of budget and enrollment trends. Not all decisions can be intuitive.

Costs of IB programs

Krajczar also noted hidden costs to smaller schools of creating IB programs. The growth of the IB has been pervasive. The programs are expensive, and the schools make a huge investment in training faculty and staff. Often those individuals then leave the small school which paid to train them because they can now earn more elsewhere at a school with a higher profile. Smaller schools may need more accurate information on likely talent flows before entering into an IB endeavor. It will probably be wiser not to undertake the IB if many of the students are American as Americans tend to be satisfied with AP programs. If the students are highly international, however, there tends to be more pressure to offer IB.

Helping Chairs

The Executive Directors also noted that Board Chairs often may not know exactly what the role of



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the Chair entails. David Chojanski of NESA mentioned several Chairs with whom he has worked who are well intentioned and dedicated but need assistance in formulating the job description and their responsibilities. NESA and other organizations aid in that training.

Rhonda James mentioned creating a special session for Board Chairs in which they could learn about their job and even admit their areas of uncertainty—which they were hesitant to do with their heads present, but felt able to do amongst themselves. The connections forged have remained and the Chairs are able to assist one another in performing better in their positions. The format has worked well and has not caused a defensive reaction in the heads.

Littleford & Associates has run three day session for chairs and heads where the chairs come for the first day alone; the heads join them for a second day together; and then the heads have a third and final day alone.

Weakening Dollar

Dixie McKay of ECIS also named a challenge on the minds of many Directors, Heads and Boards: finances, inflation, exchange rates, and the current weakness of the US dollar on the world and global market. Schools are coming under increasing pressure to pay more of their salaries in local currency or to tie wages to Euros or some other basket of currencies. It is too soon to know whether this pressure will require changes in school policy and what will prove to be a viable alternative if changes are set in motion.

Technology

Mary Virginia Sanchez of the Tri Association cited the increased use of technology in recruitment. Schools are employing Skype, video conferencing and telephone interviews instead of in-person interviews and reporting good success with that approach. Schools are also using distance learning programs in smart ways to augment their teachers' development.

Chojanski of NESA spoke of a computer based student assessment program which allows each student and their teachers to see exactly how the student is performing in science, math, English and social studies. The system generates recommendations to teachers. Schools across his association are sharing their results. This is an exciting application of technology which can allow synergy and collaboration which would have been inconceivable ten years ago. He sees this as a new and major responsibility of NESA in promoting learning opportunities of this kind.

Barbara Kraus-Blackney reported increasing pressures on schools to add distance learning capabilities.

Kraus-Blackney and others also pointed out a rise in constituent unrest. Clearly, technology can



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play a key role in this. It allows parents, faculty and even students to mobilize and organize around an issue with a speed and intensity not possible prior to email. Schools will need to become even more techno-savvy to find and head off potential firestorms before they are raging. The timely delivery of accurate information can be a strong antidote to inflammatory misinformation appearing online. A session at annual gatherings of schools focusing specifically on how to defuse electronic campaigns might be very helpful for all concerned. Littleford & Associates has also worked with many boards and schools dealing with the challenges of electronic campaigns and "town meetings" to undermine the leadership and/or the Board.

Safety and Security

Schools in many parts of the world are increasingly faced with security concerns ranging from the safety of children while traveling to the school to perimeter security while the students are in classes. Kidnapping for economic and political reasons remains a threat in Latin America and some other parts of the world. It might be very helpful for schools and associations to share best practices they are creating in this important arena.

Summary.

Clearly schools around the planet are facing many similar challenges. Heading the list in most parts of the world are creating effective boards; acknowledging the growth of for profit schools; declining ranks of qualified heads; competition for faculty; and making reasonable use of corporate models promoted by board members.

Technology is providing exciting new possibilities on several fronts. Generating a culture of collaboration and investing in the education of Heads, Boards and Chairs alike remain key ingredients in the successful navigation of these sometimes challenging waters. The human side of the equation remains the most important focus for all of us interested in producing quality education for our next generation.

What was gained most by speaking with these Executive Directors is that the world of independent and international schools is well served by a core of dedicated and bright individuals who work collaboratively but also launch initiatives to keep our schools improving and safe.

Our sincere thanks to Rick Belding, David Chojanski, Steve Clem, David Cobb, Rhonda James, Dick Krajczar, Barbara Kraus-Blackney, Dixie McKay, Paul Poore, Mary Virginia Sanchez, Richard Tangye and Meade Thayer for their gracious comments and contributions to this article.

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