



RETHINKING THE HEAD'S ROLE: Administrative restructuring as a tool to promote visionary leadership

By James W. Wickenden

Since 1986, Wickenden Associates has provided a variety of consulting services to more than 400 independent schools. Most often, we work with schools during times of headship transition, a period when Boards are likely to become more acutely aware of the demands placed on their Heads of School. Within the past couple of years, we have been retained by two schools eager to consider ways to make the Head's job more manageable – and perhaps to forestall frequent turnover in that position in the future.

These and other governance-related assignments have gotten us thinking a lot about the administrative structure of independent schools in general, and large K-12 day schools in particular. What is it, we wondered, that has brought the issue of the Head's workload to the fore in so many schools? And what is the appropriate response of a Board of Trustees concerned about this issue?

Recent Changes Complicating the Head's Job

While the core business of schooling youngsters remains fundamentally unaltered, the ancillary challenges surrounding the job of leading an educational institution have changed dramatically over the past few decades. A few examples:

- **Increased litigation or threats thereof:** When I began consulting to independent schools in 1986, lawsuits were rare. Today, nearly every Head of School has good reason to put the phone number of the school's legal counsel on speed dial. Faculty and staff whose contracts are not renewed now sue for whatever kind of discrimination they feel is applicable. Parents whose children are brought before the school's Disciplinary Committee often threaten the school with lawsuits and occasionally file them. Some Boards have created Legal Committees with the expectation that there will be plenty to keep them busy in any given school year. Heads can no longer just consider the best interests of students and the institution as they make decisions; risk management strategies, human resources protocols, and records retention policies are now on the agenda as well. All of these legal challenges translate into a new layer of demands being placed on the time, energy, and emotional stamina of the Head of School.
- **Chasing financial equilibrium amid ever increasing competition and expectations:** Although all well-run independent schools have business managers, Heads of Schools are ultimately responsible for ensuring that the school's finances are well managed. While the concept of financial equilibrium is easy to understand, it is increasingly difficult to achieve year after year. Well-intentioned Boards now regularly include in strategic plans a goal of "moving faculty salaries into the top quartile of peer schools" or "into the top 10% of all NAIS schools." Often, the same strategic plan will call for increased financial aid and more rigorous control over tuition increases as well. Undeniably, these are all noble goals. Yet I rarely hear a Board acknowledge that such a salary initiative might put the institution in an arms race with sister schools – one that will require the Head to continually raise significantly more money or to increase enrollment. Both efforts will place substantial additional demands on the Head's time.

- **Increased pressure for more communication and transparency:** Whenever we launch a search for a new Head of School, we ask everyone whom we interview a series of questions including “What qualities are you seeking in the new Head of School?” Twenty years ago we rarely heard, “We need someone who is a superb communicator.” Today, virtually every constituent group is looking for someone who is a skilled communicator, is open and transparent, and is unfailingly responsive to the concerns of faculty, parents, students, and alumni. This expectation that the Head will be the Communicator in Chief has been further complicated by the explosion in instant communication devices including email, cell phones, and BlackBerrys. Today, Heads tell me, they routinely face scores of electronic messages each day – most from individuals expecting an immediate reply. Responding to this explosion, the conscientious Head of School must allocate time – often significant – to satisfy the communications expectations of the school community.
- **The Consumer Mentality:** Reinforcing the communications challenges facing Heads is the underlying attitude of entitlement that has emerged with a vengeance among many independent school parents over the past couple of decades. These parents not infrequently introduce their demands with the statement, “Since I am paying tuition, I expect the school to (fill in the blank).” This attitude, unfortunately, gives little or no recognition to the fact that running a school is terribly complex and that decisions need to be made for the greater good of all students, not simply to benefit a few. Second, many parents who send their children to an independent school have expectations that the Head of School should be visible at all of the plays, art exhibits, recitals, and games. Obviously, attendance at all these events is incredibly time-consuming. If the Head bows to the pressure of parents to be consistently visible, that person has no alternative other than to log in hours during the evenings or early mornings to respond to emails, correspondence, and telephone calls. As noted in Madeline Levine’s book, **The Price of Privilege**, there was once a time when parents worked in partnership with schools to discipline students who stepped out of line. Unfortunately, this partnership in the moral and social development of youngsters can no longer be assumed. When I visit schools now, I hear about parents entering uninvited the elementary school classes of their children, complaining about grades, or even writing papers for their child – but also blindly defending their child whenever he or she engages in inappropriate behavior. In so doing, these parents prevent the students from taking ownership of their own behavior, learning from their mistakes, and developing a sense of responsibility. Parents who go to the Head (whether immediately or after another administrator or teacher did not give them the response they wanted) routinely expect the Head to drop what he or she is doing to address the crisis of the moment. These parents are not just making more demands on the time of the Head; they are creating an environment in which the Head feels under siege.
- **Trustee Turnover:** To enable Boards to bring in new blood and to diplomatically cut ties with minimally effective trustees, term limits have been embraced by many schools during the past 25 years. There are certainly benefits to this strategy, but there is a downside to term limits as well. Boards need institutional memory, and there are obvious benefits to retaining trustees who have been generous with their wealth, wisdom, and willingness to work. When term limits require that valuable trustees step aside for a year, the school runs the risk of losing that patron to another nonprofit institution, be it a museum, a church, or a hospital. To replace these extraordinary individuals is not easy. Often, key Board initiatives stall as a result. And guess who must participate in the search process for new trustees? Once again, major demands are made on the Head’s time – both to find and to orient new Board members to productive participation.

All of the above-mentioned phenomena eat away at the time Heads need to perform their jobs well. Even more unsettling, in my view, is the long-term impact of these drains on the Head's time and energy. I believe independent schools today, more than ever, need leaders who are focused on the long term – thinking creatively and strategically about emerging challenges. While conventional wisdom in independent school governance suggests that the Board should drive strategic planning, I find that relatively few Boards have the expertise or time to do this well – particularly in areas related to the educational program. It is far better, I think, to adapt an administrative structure that enables the Head of School to function effectively as Planner in Chief, devising productive strategies to address complex challenges such as these:

- The increasingly competitive environment for recruiting first-rate faculty and administrators, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, requires schools to develop an approach to recruitment and retention that is highly professional, proactive, and technology-based. With the wave of retirements of veteran teachers projected to intensify in the years ahead, schools committed to excellence cannot afford to approach this task haphazardly. Time must be devoted not only to recruiting experienced teachers, but also to thinking creatively about how one might identify potentially talented teachers from non-traditional sources, such as engineering, business, and the military.
- Increased competition for students, coupled with continually emerging research about the ways in which students learn, will require many schools to position themselves in the forefront of educational innovation within their marketplaces. Parents are increasingly knowledgeable about advances in education and seek out schools that can demonstrate success.
- Adapting educational programming to reflect the current interest in globalism and environmental sustainability initiatives as well as emerging technologies requires constant attention these days. What will students need to know and be able to do to succeed in the world they will inherit? Further complicating the life of an educational leader is determining how schools should deal with the *negative* effects of technology. Robert Putnam in his book, **Bowling Alone**, explains how youngsters addicted to their iPods, cell phones, and computers are gradually becoming social isolates. As such, technology functions as an obstacle to the creation of community. While the Head of School is not the Chief Information Officer, he or she is responsible for creating a healthy culture. Any phenomenon that contributes to the fragmentation of community should rank high among the Head's concerns.

How Administrative Restructuring Can Help

There are two justifications for recommending an administrative restructuring. First, I firmly believe that the increased demands on the Head's time will continue to intensify. Such being the case, Boards concerned about the tenure of their Heads of School should give serious consideration to reducing the involvement of these educational leaders in the day-to-day operation of the school. Second, Boards concerned about long-term issues and the implementation of the institution's strategic initiatives must provide the Heads with the time not only to research and reflect, but also to implement change.

What would a successful administrative restructuring look like? It would permit Heads to spend less time at their desks responding to the immediate demands of parents and faculty members and less time in front of their computers responding to the email deluge. Instead, Heads should be encouraged to develop relationships, both within the school and in the community in which the school is located. These relationships are vital to the welfare of the school! Faculty and staff members need to be recognized personally for their contributions. The Head is uniquely positioned to provide positive feedback to these individuals. That cannot be done simply by email, or telephone calls, or even handwritten notes –

although all are important. The Head must be visible and engaged in the one-on-one communications that build relationships; with these relationships comes mutual trust and respect.

Second, the Head must spend time cultivating potential donors who have the wherewithal to make significant contributions to the school. Trustees cannot forget the development adage, “People give to people to help people.” Heads must spend time forging relationships with potential donors, learning about their interests and persuading them that their contributions will have a significant impact on those attending the school or working at the school. This cultivation must be done well, for those with resources are besieged by people representing noble organizations, all of whom are requesting financial support.

In sum, the key challenges that I believe Heads of large K-12 schools should focus on are as follows:

1. Developing an effective working relationship with the Board of Trustees, and particularly with the President of the Board.
2. Developing mutual respect and trust with the faculty by meeting them on their own turf and noting how each contributes to the development of the whole child.
3. Contributing to the recruitment of outstanding faculty members to replace those who intend to retire in the next five to ten years.
4. Cultivating those parents, grandparents and alumni who have the capacity to make major contributions to the school.
5. Thinking and acting strategically to position the school for long-term success.

Lessons from Our Research

There is considerable evidence to suggest that Heads are actively grappling with the question of how best to organize their senior leadership teams in this era of heightened challenges. During the 2006-07 school year, Wickenden Associates surveyed the Heads of 22 large K-12 independent schools to inquire about their administrative structures and any recent changes they had instituted.

The results were fascinating:

- Among the 22 schools, **no two senior administrative structures were identical**. Clearly, there is no single best-practice model today among K-12 independent schools.
- The **number of administrators reporting directly to the Head** ranges from 8 to 12, with 10 the average number.
- Two-thirds of the Heads said they had altered the structure of their senior staff **within the past three years**, a further indication of the fluid status of independent school administration in today’s complex environment. The reasons for the restructurings were enlightening as well, variously reflecting changing strategic priorities, a desire to capitalize upon the strengths of a particular administrator, a need to catch up in technology, or an attempt to cut down on direct reports to the Head.
- Perhaps reflecting the changes in the nature of the challenges facing independent schools today, a few Heads reported that they have added one or more of the following positions to the group of administrators reporting directly to the Head: Human Resources Director, Director of Diversity, Director of Technology, and Director of Communications.

- The chart below summarizes the responses of all 22 Heads to the inquiry about whether various positions exist in their schools and whether those positions report directly to the Head:

| Responses of 22 Heads | Position Exists in School | Reports Directly to Head |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Director of Development/Advancement | 100% | 100% |
| Director of Finance/Business Manager | 100% | 100% |
| Director of Admissions | 100% | 95% |
| Director of Lower School | 100% | 95% |
| Director of Middle School | 100% | 95% |
| Director of Upper School | 100% | 95% |
| Director of Athletics | 100% | 68% |
| Director of Technology/Chief Information Officer | 95% | 67% |
| Director of College Counseling | 95% | 24% |
| Director of Facilities/Buildings & Grounds | 95% | 24% |
| Director of Communications/Public Relations | 86% | 21% |
| Dean of Students | 64% | 0% |
| Director of Diversity/Multicultural Affairs | 59% | 46% |
| Dean of Academic Affairs/Studies | 45% | 70% |
| Assistant Head | 41% | 100% |
| Director of Human Resources | 36% | 13% |
| Associate Head | 14% | 100% |
| Dean of Faculty | 9% | 50% |

How Boards Can Help

Because time is a finite resource and even the most energetic Head has his or her limits, Boards concerned about the longevity of their school leaders should at the very least consider altering the parameters of the Head's job through an administrative restructuring. While I firmly believe that the design of the administrative structure is mainly the Head's responsibility, it can be difficult for a Head – particularly a recently appointed one – to approach the Board with a request that might call into question their energy and commitment. Furthermore, those in the administration who were given additional responsibilities might feel as if they were being overly burdened.

To address these issues, the restructuring of the school can be initiated by the Board, but planned by the Head and the Board working collaboratively. One approach is for the trustees to authorize a study of the situation, consider a variety of alternatives in consultation with the Head, and then approve a new structure.

The outcome of any administrative restructuring exercise is difficult to predict. No one model fits all schools, and any restructuring should reflect the strengths and interest of the Head of School, the challenges facing the school, and the skills and talents of the administrators already in place. Furthermore, once the restructuring has been implemented, both the Board and the Head must be disciplined enough to resist the inevitable attempts to draw the Head back into operational matters that he or she has delegated to others.

I recommend that three principles guide any restructuring process. These are:

1. Where possible, the number of direct reports to the Head of School should be reduced.
2. The restructuring should be designed to enable the Head to focus on the important – not just the urgent – challenges facing the school.
3. Any restructuring should take into consideration succession planning. Giving less senior administrators more responsibility may encourage talented individuals to remain with the school and may eventually enable the Board to look inside as well as outside the school when the time comes to search for a new Head. Even if that does not occur, a well-managed sharing of leadership responsibilities should promote a healthier, more resilient school.

Conclusion

Undeniably, administrative restructurings can meet with resistance, particularly if some members of the administrative team lose the direct access to the Head to which they had been accustomed.

What cannot be denied, however, is the fact that the demands on the time of the Head of School have increased exponentially over the past couple of decades. I see nothing on the horizon that is likely to cause these demands to diminish. Assuming that the number of hours in a day will not change and assuming that every Head's energy level is finite, the wise Board of Trustees will do what it can to forestall burnout and to provide the Head with a reasonable opportunity to achieve success and feel fulfilled.

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