



To our clients and friends,

*It has been several years since we last conducted a survey of Heads of Schools. Both our 1991 survey, **Preparing for Headship: Advice from the Front Lines**, and our 1992 survey, **Heads Rate Their Boards**, were well received and continue to make appearances in the literature of independent school governance. Last summer, we decided to undertake our third survey of Heads, exploring the topic of trusteeship from a different perspective.*

Much has been written about the ways in which Boards as a group and trustees as individuals fall short in their efforts to govern. At the same time, we know from our consulting work with more than 200 schools that many institutions have reaped remarkable benefits from the efforts of extraordinarily dedicated Board members.

We've also heard many Heads speak with gratitude and admiration about trustees who have offered invaluable professional and personal support. Even so, we were surprised at the outpouring of genuine affection and respect for exemplary trustees that was reflected in the survey responses we received from more than 400 Heads.

Clearly, these largely unsung heroes deserve to be celebrated and emulated. By sharing their example of extraordinary service with the independent school community at large, we hope to enlighten and inspire others who wish to make meaningful contributions to the schools they serve.

*James W. Wickenden
July 2000*

Superstar Trustees: A Celebration of Service

*By Alison Cumming
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In the late summer of 1999, Wickenden Associates mailed a four-page survey to 1,075 Heads of independent schools throughout the U.S., inviting them to tell us about one or more “Superstar Trustees” – Board members whose contributions to their schools had been particularly exemplary.

We were delighted at both the volume of responses – 402 Heads “nominated” a total of 437 superstars – and the enthusiasm with which Heads recounted their association with these extraordinary volunteers. Many went far beyond simply completing the survey, composing inspiring testimonials that described remarkable accomplishments and enduring relationships. One Head noted that he hopes one day to write a book about his superstar trustee. (Although we also encouraged Heads to respond if they had never encountered a trustee superstar, we received fewer than five such responses.)

Because we did not ask Heads to identify their superstars by name, we have opted not to include any identifications. We regret that we cannot publicly recognize these individuals, and hope that these heartfelt testimonials also found their way directly to the honorees. Instead, we focus here on common themes that emerged from the research. Superstar trustees, it appears, tend to share the following characteristics:

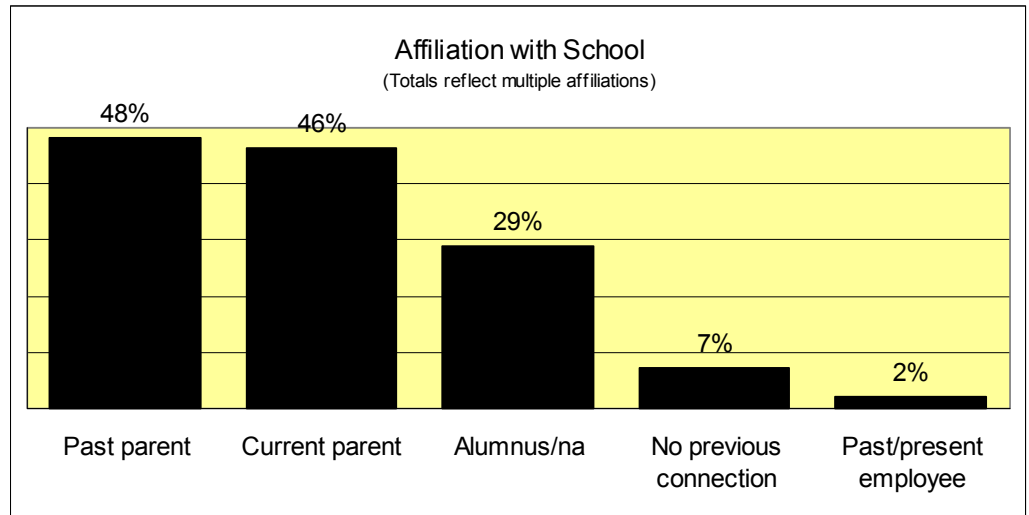
- *A purity of motive.* These exemplary trustees served their schools out of loyalty, gratitude, and commitment to the mission of the institution. They embodied the ethos of the servant leader, grateful for the opportunity to give back to the schools they love.
- *A record of sustained service, often stretching over many years and, in some cases, decades.* Their longevity and their willingness to devote significant amounts of time to their trustee obligations made them valuable repositories of wisdom.
- *An ability to serve their schools in myriad ways.* Generalists rather than specialists, these trustees rose to whatever challenges confronted their schools: raising money, building buildings, improving governance, responding to crises, and seizing opportunities. Through it all, they earned the respect, affection, and gratitude of their fellow trustees and their Heads.

Who They Are

“He is a man whose mission is to plan for a school that will serve his daughter’s grand-daughter.”

“Especially valuable is an alumnus who models the sort of graduates you would like to produce.”

“This gentleman had a unique ability to see beyond his parent role in the school. My experience has led me to question the ability of 99 percent of the population to serve on a Board if a parent of a student in attendance.”



The Parent Connection

Given the legendary difficulties encountered by school leaders in dealing with the sometimes conflicting loyalties of parent trustees, perhaps the most surprising finding of our research was the high percentage of parents who garnered superstar nominations.

Remarkably, 80 percent of these exemplary trustees were or had been parents at their schools. A closer look at the statistics reveals the following:

- 34% of the superstars were past parents but not current parents
- 32% were current parents but not past parents
- 14% were both current *and* past parents
- 19 % of current parents and 24% of past parents were also graduates of the school.

Lest readers think that the parent conflict-of-interest issue is overstated in schools, our Head respondents were quick to point out that these parent superstars are the exception rather than the rule – they are viewed as all the more remarkable because of their ability to transcend the traps into which parent trustees so typically fall. Many Heads noted that past parents can offer the best of both worlds: They are knowledgeable about and connected to the school but free from the emotional baggage and consumer orientation that can sometimes compromise the judgement of current parents.

In an effort to avoid some of these conflicting loyalties issues, many nominating committees are now seeking out prospective trustees who are unconnected to the school. While these “objective outsiders” may indeed be highly valuable trustees, our survey results also suggest that it is the strong personal connection between trustee and school that often sets the stage for remarkable contributions of treasure, time, and talent.

“A CEO of a small family business has time and resources to devote to a school that big corporate people don’t and really small business people can’t afford to spend. They also understand risk analysis and flexible strategic planning – they’ve done it themselves – and they tend to be more flexible in their thinking.”

"It's not money or power that makes a good trustee. I like people who know how and have had successful experiences in large organizations. That said, I've had very successful and fun relationships with entrepreneurs – especially when it comes to compensation!"

The Gender Gap

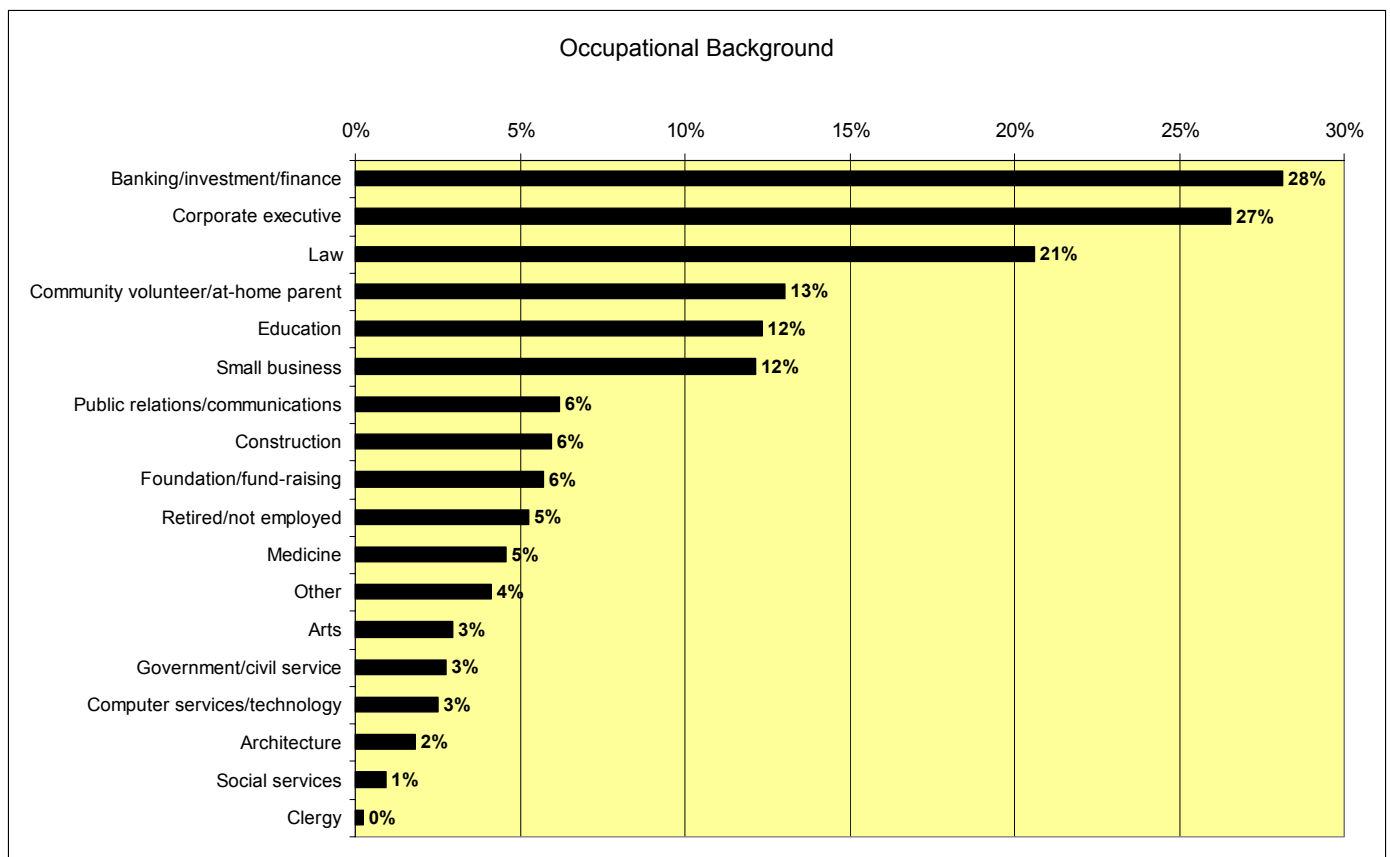
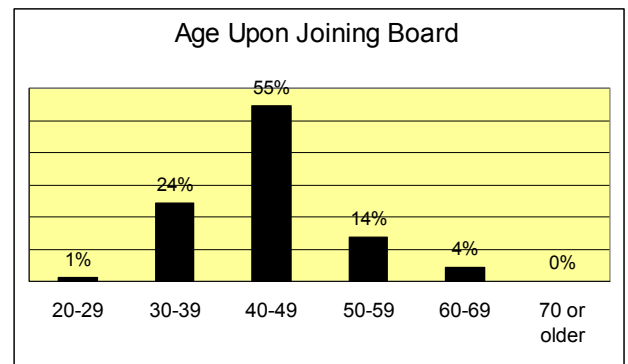
We did not inquire about differences between men and women in the exercise of exemplary leadership, nor did any of the Heads expressly discuss this topic. Thus we cannot offer explanations for the finding that 73 percent of the superstars were men. (Reliable statistics on the demographics of U.S. independent school Boards as a whole are not available, so we also cannot say whether this proportion reflects the overall proportion of men and women who serve on Boards.)

One interesting footnote: Among the Heads who identified themselves to us, 26 percent were women. Although both male and female Heads nominated more men than women as superstars, female Heads were more likely to nominate a woman than were male Heads:

- 37 percent of the superstars nominated by women were women.
- 22 percent of the superstars nominated by men were women.

Age and Occupational Background

"The most effective trustees I have worked with have been people who have already achieved personal and professional success and are at a time in their lives when they are interested in giving back to the school that helped them or a family member."



How They Act

"The best trustees are those who – even when faced with huge and critical tasks to accomplish – maintain an overriding sense of supportive personal relationship with all those who are part of the solution. Specialized expertise is of course important on a Board, but the personality and values behind it are what makes it useful and effective."

"They have authority, but they are not authoritarian. Our trustees are serious but not grim, generous but not frivolous, and present but not a chronic presence. The faculty and staff are fond of our trustees and enjoy being with them – not a common occurrence, I imagine."

Curious about the skills and talents that exemplary trustees bring to bear on their work with schools, we asked Heads to check off the words and phrases that best described their superstars. We found that these outstanding trustees brought to the table many different skills and qualities, and that most of them rated highly in several of these areas.

Values Matter Most

The survey results suggest, not surprisingly, that exemplary trustees are first and foremost exemplary people. Nearly universally, they possess high standards and good values. They respect others and are well respected in return. They can be trusted.

Superstar trustees also appeared able to successfully balance two sometimes competing characteristics: While described as unusually loyal to their schools, the great majority of the nominated leaders also demonstrated the ability to separate their own interests from the best interests of the school and to focus on the big picture. That achievement is all the more remarkable given the high number of the trustees who also wore parent hats.

Expertise Matters Least

Given the emphasis usually placed on the essential role of trustees in fund-raising, we were somewhat surprised to see that only 41 percent of the superstars were rated by their Heads as excellent fund-raisers. (Two-thirds, however, were considered generous donors.) Nor – despite their status as governance superstars – were many of these exemplary trustees identified as “experts” on governance.

Although a number of Heads noted the importance of having at least one fellow educator on the Board of Trustees, expertise on educational issues was the least common trait among superstar trustees. Nearly half of the trustees, by contrast, possessed business and financial expertise.

Other Traits and Qualities

While we attempted to provide a comprehensive list of traits and qualities from which to choose, Heads suggested several additional key attributes. Chief among them was a good sense of humor, which numerous leaders described as vital. Other descriptive terms mentioned with some frequency: patient and persistent (gracefully tenacious, as one Head put it) upbeat and positive, flexible, inclusive, calm, courageous, and “OK with conflict.”

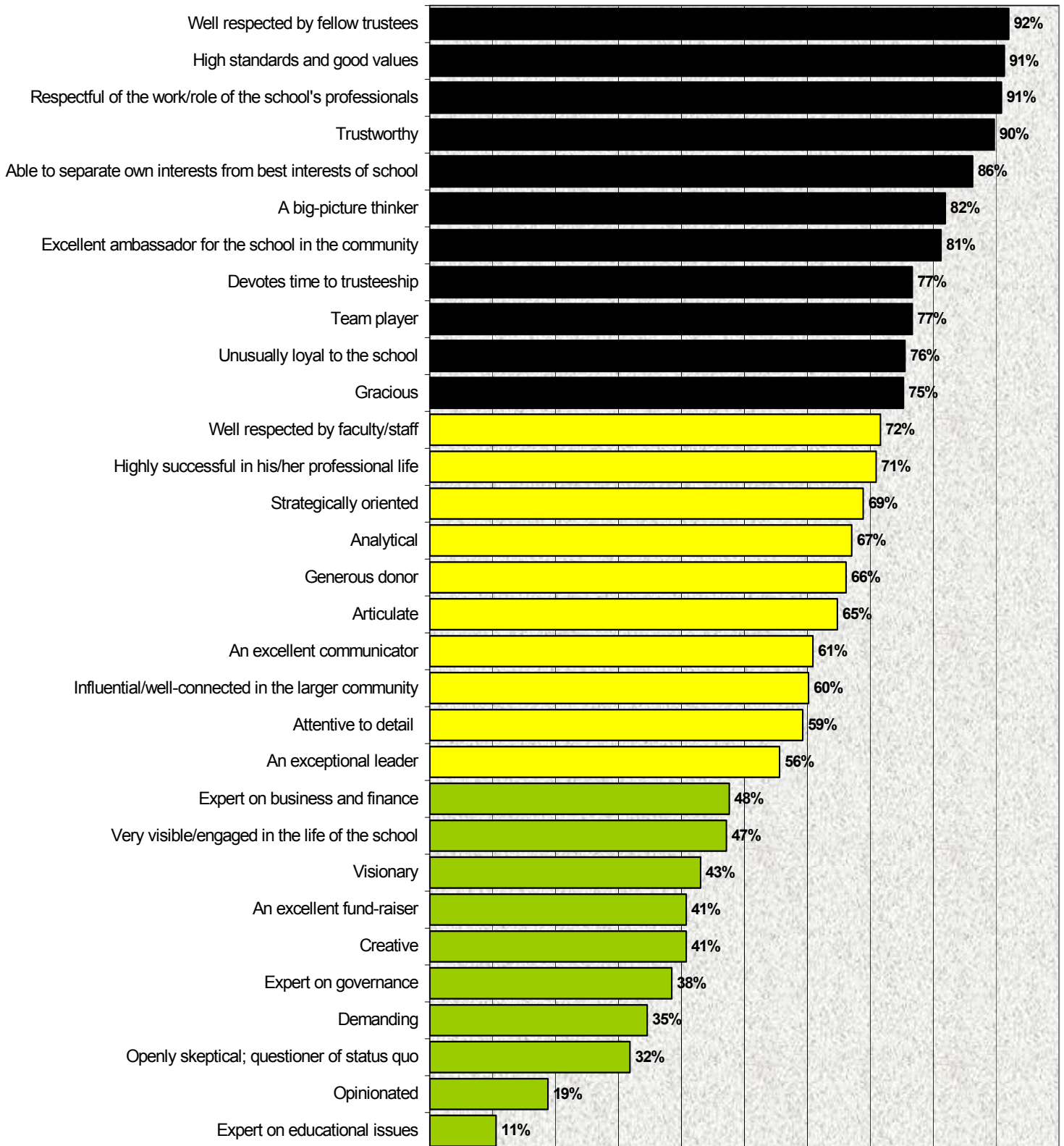
We included some words and phrases that could be interpreted as less than positive (openly skeptical, opinionated, demanding), because we were interested in learning whether many of the superstars could be described as “difficult” but successful nevertheless. Relatively few of the superstars, however, appeared to merit these labels. For the most part, Heads described their exemplary trustees as nice people – relationship-builders who brought out the best in others.

"She has made me realize that trustees lead by example and by the totality of who they are. She is not the most brilliant, most articulate, or even the most enthusiastic or supportive, but she is a team player, unbelievably respectful of others, and an exemplary parent, person, and Board member."

A Multi-Talented Group

From among a list of 31 traits and qualities, we asked Heads to select the words and phrases that most aptly described their superstar trustees. The chart on the facing page illustrates the percentage of superstars who were described as possessing each of the qualities. On average, the superstars were credited with 19 of the 31 traits.

Superstar Trustees: Their Traits and Qualities



What They Contribute

“A can-do attitude that galvanized our status quo Board. He challenged, chided, and led them into a major capital campaign. They didn’t want to disappoint him. He made them feel good about themselves and worked us to death – and we wanted more!”

“Effective trustees bring to the table the ability to envision, create, and implement change. . . To see the school not just as it is but as it should be is critical for leaders, and trustees have to recognize in themselves their roles as both stewards and enablers.”

In addition to collecting demographic data and information about specific characteristics of exemplary trustees, we invited Heads to tell us in their own words about the accomplishments that merited their trustees’ classification as superstars. We transcribed their responses and then sorted them into broad categories. The results were illuminating, and are presented here in order of frequency of mention.

Board Builders

Superstar trustees, it seems, not only understand good governance themselves but possess the ability to elevate the performance of their fellow trustees on behalf of the school. At least 155 of the exemplary trustees were specifically recognized for their Board-building accomplishments – more than any other category. Their contributions in this area took many forms:

Some implemented improvements in Board process – making Board meetings more interesting, strengthening committee work, abolishing executive committees that threatened Board unity, codifying Board policies, and rewriting bylaws.

Many Board Chairs took on the difficult task of “reining in runaway trustees” – disciplining those who breached confidentiality, confused their parent and trustee roles, overstepped the limits of their authority, or acted in ways that undermined the Head.

Board builders were also attentive to the importance of developing the governance skills of all trustees through careful selection, orientation, education, and evaluation.

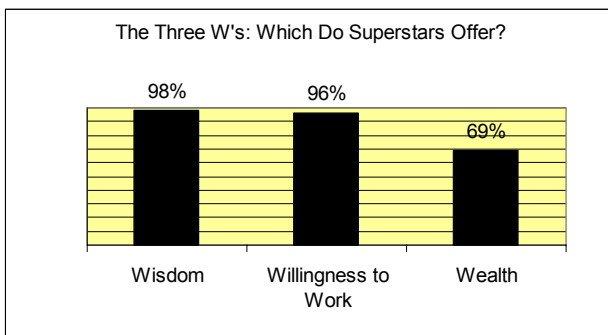
Above all, these outstanding trustees earned the respect and affection of their fellow Board members. They focused on building consensus and bringing out the best in each trustee. By making Board service more inspiring and rewarding for all, superstar trustees appeared often to create a synergistic effect that attracted ever stronger new members while energizing existing ones.

Givers and Getters

The exemplary trustees recognized here have no doubt been collectively responsible for donating and/or raising hundreds of millions of dollars for their independent schools. The results of their work are evident on campuses across the country in new facilities, strengthened faculties, and healthier endowments.

Fifty-eight of the trustees were specifically recognized as generous donors and 127 as highly successful fund-raisers or campaign leaders. Yet virtually none of these trustees was described *only* as a giver or a getter. For most of these trustees, giving was one element along a continuum of leadership that typically also included major accomplishments in the areas of strategic and financial planning, Board development, and crisis management.

Many Heads noted that exemplary trustees are not merely generous donors but are often *strategic* givers as well, allocating their gifts to areas of greatest need and leveraging their donations to attract the support of other major givers.



◀ Wisdom Trumps Wealth

*While 69 percent of the exemplary trustees possessed **wealth**, the characteristics of **wisdom** and **willingness to work** were nearly universal among superstars. As one Head said, “Given the choice between leadership and big bucks, I would choose leadership every time.”*

The Gift of Time

Exemplary trusteeship takes time, as demonstrated by the long years of service reflected here. And because 57 percent of these trustees were still serving on the Board at the time the surveys were completed, these already impressive numbers will climb before the trustees' service concludes.

"I so often read about rotating trustees off the Board after so many years of service. I disagree with this policy. Three of our Board members have 30 years of service to the school. All are financially generous and offer excellent advice."

Transformers and Change Agents

As if the ongoing challenges of trusteeship were not enough, many of these superstars were pressed into service time and again in the face of school crises or upheavals. It is not an exaggeration to say that many of these trustees can be credited with "saving their school" at defining moments. Through bold and decisive leadership, superstar trustees have carried their schools through controversial changes of mission, disruptive changes of leadership, major financial disasters, campus moves, expansions, and contractions. Less dramatic but no less crucial are the thoughtful strategic planning exercises that move schools forward. Sixty-seven of the trustees were specifically cited for their success at leading strategic, master facilities, or financial planning initiatives.

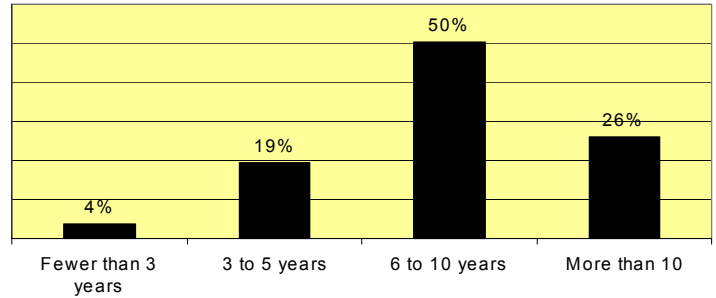
Fifty-three Heads noted that their superstars also played key roles in the transition to their headships, with most of these leading the search committees that hired them and many then moving into the Board Chair role.

Advisors and Friends

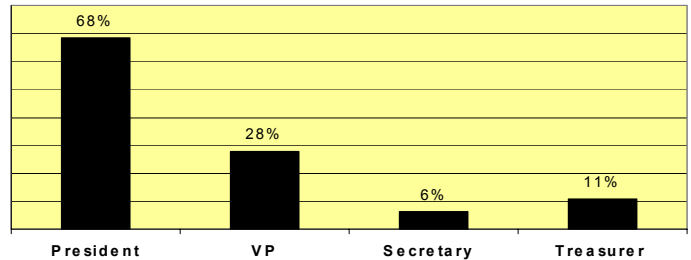
When we asked Heads whether they would describe their superstars as personal supporters and friends in addition to colleagues, the most frequent response was, "Yes, absolutely!" While stories of rocky Head-trustee relations are legion in independent schools, so, too, apparently are genuinely close connections between Board Chairs and Heads. Sixteen Heads described their superstars as "mentors," many more as close friends and confidants.

In a job that can be lonely and isolating, Heads rely upon their Board Chairs for encouragement, perspective, advice, and frequent doses of humor. They appreciate both public gestures of support and private expressions of criticism that sharpen their thinking and improve their performance. They like Board members who demonstrate their support by being advocates at the Board level for adequate compensation and benefits. And they are truly grateful for trustees who genuinely care about their personal and family lives as well as their professional ones.

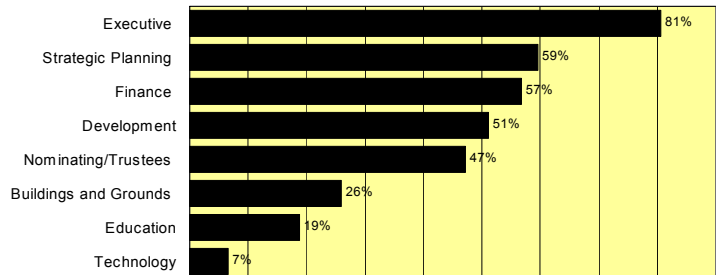
Years of Board Service



Board Offices Held



Committees on Which Superstars Were Active



Examples of Trustee Contributions

- Published Board and committee handbooks
- Organized an annual Board-faculty dinner
- Helped out in the Admissions Office when the Director left mid-year
- Endowed a fund for faculty development
- Wrote personal notes on fund-raising appeals
- Restructured the school's mortgage
- Fund-raised for and built a new playground
- Reduced length and number of meetings
- Held parent meetings on school finance
- Revamped the Education Committee
- While traveling, visited colleges to talk about the school and drop off packets
- Chaired the public meeting to announce an unpopular decision to drop a school sport
- Helped to locate, finance, and build a new campus.



“Today’s trustees are much more troublesome than their colleagues of years past – very bottom-line, detail-oriented, sometimes more in employer/employee mode with Head than collaborator. We need to be more careful in choosing trustees, orienting and educating them to the mission.”

“I realize more and more each year just how difficult the job of serving as a trustee has become. Our primary concern is the training of future Board leadership. We are challenged by the long time needed to orient and acclimate a new Board member. Few of the Board members at our school have any previous experience on a Board such as ours. We find that it takes at least two years for a Board member to feel knowledgeable and then comfortable to step into the real serious business of trustee work.”

Lessons from the Research

While the Heads who responded to our survey were eager to celebrate these outstanding volunteers, their comments also made it clear that the selection and development of trustees remains a challenging and difficult enterprise at most independent schools. What can be learned from the research? We offer the following:

Lessons for the Board Chair

- Lead the Board so your Head can lead the school.
- Strive for a collaborative rather than a supervisory relationship with your Head; the most rewarding of these collaborations are partnerships of equals.
- Be attentive to the personal as well as the professional needs of your Head.

Lessons for the Committee on Trustees

- When evaluating prospective trustees, pay as much attention (if not more) to the underlying motives and values of the candidates as you do to their areas of expertise and giving potential.
- When evaluating prospective parent trustees, probe aggressively to assess their ability to separate the two roles.
- Strive for longevity of service. Be wary of restrictive term limits and other policies that discourage continuity and long-term commitments.
- Ensure that the Head of School is an active participant in the trustee selection process. Listen carefully to the Head’s concerns and perspectives about the suitability of candidates for the challenges of trusteeship.
- Do everything possible to orient new trustees and speed their transition into active, productive Board service.
- Remember that few exemplary trustees are born to the role; ensure that all Board members have the opportunity to develop their governance knowledge and skills.

Finally, on behalf of these 400+ Heads as well as the countless students, parents, faculty, and staff who reap the benefits of their dedication, we are delighted to acknowledge and celebrate the work of superstar trustees – past, present, and yet to come.