



Undertaking a Head of School Search?

Six Steps Your Board Should Take To Promote a Successful Leadership Transition

Few, if any, aspects of trusteeship rival the Head of School search for sheer challenge, hard work, and potential for reward. The fruits of a successful search are magnificent to behold: an outstanding new leader for the school as well as a renewed and energized school community, excited about the future and rededicated to the pursuit of a shared mission.

The search for new leadership in a school is like a stone cast into a pond: The resulting ripples can either strengthen the school culture or heighten existing tensions and create new pockets of dissatisfaction. Because the occasion of the Head search marks both an end and a new beginning, it is an appropriate time to reflect on the school's condition and plan for the future. The search provides the Board with an opportunity to:

1. Review the school's mission statement and either affirm or define a vision for the school's future.
2. Articulate immediate and long-term goals for the new Head.
3. Review and, if necessary, improve communication with and among the various constituencies of the school.
4. Strengthen the Board's own performance and renew its commitment to the school.

When the Board seizes these opportunities, the search is far more likely to succeed on every level: The fit of Head and school is likely to be good; the various school constituencies are likely to feel confident about their new leader; the new Head will enter the position with clearly understood expectations and goals; and the Board will have developed a logical set of criteria upon which to evaluate the new Head's performance in the years to come.

A skilled search consultant will guide you through the nuts and bolts of the search process itself, including the development of a position description, recruiting candidates, winnowing the field, selecting and evaluating finalists, and successfully concluding the search with the appointment of your next Head. Yet, while a well-conducted search will go a long way toward promoting a successful transition to new leadership, ensuring the best possible start for your next Head of School is a task that should not be delegated solely to the Search Committee and consultant.

Here are six additional steps the wise Board Chair will take to ensure a successful next chapter in the life of your school.

1. Select for Success: Assemble a Stellar Search Committee

The selection of the Head Search Committee members and its Chair are among the earliest and most critical decisions the Board Chair must make in a leadership transition process that may extend for a year or more. If you could post an ad for the ideal Search Committee Chair, it might read like this:

Wanted: Visionary thinker, superb administrator, astute judge of character, exceptional communicator, and talented goodwill ambassador with a flair for matchmaking and an abundance of free time. Must be wise but not arrogant, willing to listen but not easily manipulated, and decisive but process-oriented. The fainthearted need not apply.

Assembling a first-rate team of Search Committee members, guided by a well-respected Search Chair, is a task that the Board Chair should pursue with great care; good choices now will pay great dividends later. While we have worked successfully with search committees of widely varying compositions, sizes, and personalities, we offer the following guidelines:

1. Because the Head appointment is solely the Board's responsibility, the committee should be composed predominantly of current trustees.
2. Consider including one or two faculty members and perhaps an administrator, which can enhance the quality of deliberations and provide a perspective on the daily life of the school that trustees might not possess. Their roles, however, should not be viewed as "representing" the views of the faculty as a whole.
3. The committee should reflect the diversity of the school community and should include a mix of both veteran members of the school family and relative newcomers.
4. A committee size of approximately eight to twelve members seems to work well.
5. The current Board President often but not always serves on the committee. If a change of Board President is planned within the next couple of years, the likely next President should serve on – and perhaps chair – the Search Committee. There is no relationship more important to the health of the school than the one between the Head and the Board President; the search process is an ideal time to begin forging that connection.

Advisory Committees

While advisory committees are not a necessary component of the search process, search committees sometimes choose to encourage and organize input from the various school constituencies by creating an advisory group composed of faculty, parents, and/or alumni. In particular, such a group can be valuable if no faculty members are included on the Search Committee. Wickenden Associates would typically meet with the advisory group at the beginning of the search to gather their impressions and concerns about the school. While Advisory Committee members don't participate in Search Committee interviews or deliberations, they can play a role during finalist visits, both as guides and as evaluators of the candidates.

Deciding who will serve on the advisory groups is always a complicated political issue. Often, the Search Committee's best bet is to ask existing organizations representing the various constituencies – the parent association, alumni council, or the faculty as a whole – to nominate candidates to the advisory committee. The Search Committee should, however, reserve the right to make the final decisions about the membership of this group. We also recommend that one member of the Search Committee be appointed to the Advisory Committee to maintain healthy communication between the two groups and to ensure that the Advisory Committee stays on task. Whatever the eventual composition of the advisory body, the Search Committee must tactfully but firmly make clear to the advisors that their role is in fact advisory, and that all decisions ultimately rest with the Search Committee.

2. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

From the moment that the need for a Head of School search becomes apparent, the Board leadership should begin planning a robust communications effort that will continue throughout the search process. Perhaps one of the least obvious but most important functions of the Board and Search Chair is to manage the flow of information so that a genuine sense of openness and inclusion is conveyed to all members of the school family. A search conducted under a veil of secrecy will leave faculty, administrators, and parents apprehensive at best, suspicious or disaffected at worst. Attention to this aspect of the search is particularly important at schools that are already in flux, perhaps as a result of the firing of the current Head, faculty morale problems or an enrollment or budget crisis.

Communications channels should flow both ways, providing members of the school community with opportunities to share their views with the search consultant and the Search Committee. Wickenden Associates, for example, provides online vehicles for communication both at the outset of the search and at the finalist interview stage.

If the school has a communications director, he or she should be involved from the beginning; a high level of professionalism in these communications promotes confidence in the process. Customarily, the formal announcement of a Head search begins with the publication of letters from both the outgoing Head and the Board Chair, recapping the Head's accomplishments and providing broad information about the process that will follow. Additional communications typically follow when the consultant visits to conduct interviews, when semifinalists are selected (though their names are not disclosed), when finalist interviews are scheduled, and when the new Head is hired. Today, most schools also use the website and social networking tools to communicate these announcements.

3. Prepare a Charge to the Head

Head of School candidates frequently ask, "What are the three or four most important issues that will face the new Head during the first few years?"

It's a reasonable question, and one to which the well-organized Board will have a ready response in the form of a Charge to the New Head. This written charge helps to translate the mission statement into a set of action items for the new leader. Later, it will serve as the basis for the Board's evaluation of the Head. Faculty, students, parents, trustees, alumni, and community leaders expect the Head to listen to them. They also expect the Head to do their bidding. The fact that these special interest groups have conflicting demands bothers them not a whit. Faculty members might lobby for higher salaries, students for more arts or athletic facilities, and parents for tuition relief. But the budget is finite. And the more that is allocated to one pressure group, the less there is for the others.

Thus the Head must constantly perform a delicate balancing act. Just as referring to the school's mission and operational statement may help the Head make fundamental decisions about the future of the school, so a written charge can help the Head maintain a balance and define priorities. To prevent the new Head from being pulled in different directions by the ever present and always competing political factions, the Board's charge should specify the issues that must be uppermost on the institution's and therefore the new Head's priority list. If a strategic plan exists, it can be consulted in developing the charge. If the strategic plan is outdated or non-existent, the charge to the Head might include instructions to begin the process of developing one. Unless the school is in crisis, the charge should *not* include items that will require the Head to address highly controversial issues or make unpopular decisions during the first year of his or her tenure.

To protect the Head from those who don't share the Board's priorities, the charge must be made known to all of the school's constituencies. If everyone knows that the Head has been asked first and foremost to develop an integrated, coordinated, and articulated curriculum, he or she will find it far easier to decline

opportunities to become involved in interesting but time-consuming civic responsibilities. If on the other hand, the new Head has been charged with the task of heightening the visibility of the school within the community, he or she might welcome the opportunity — and more easily defend the choice — to become involved with the United Way or sit on the Board of a hospital.

Ideally, the Board will begin developing the charge shortly after the search is launched so that a draft of its contents will be available to candidates at the semifinalist or finalist stages of the search.

The mission statement and Charge to the Head offer a welcome roadmap to a stranger arriving in a strange land. Boards unwilling or unable to provide these guideposts should not be surprised if their new Head wanders off course.

4. Perform a Governance Tune-Up

Board-Head relationships are as individualized as the independent schools at which they occur. The arrival of your new Head will undoubtedly alter the ground rules under which the Board operates, because each Head brings his or her own style of interacting with the Board President, committees, and the Board as a whole. At the same time, it is important for the Board to be clear about its own expectations and obligations in the Board-Head partnership.

Because a strong and supportive Board is the best gift you can give your new Head, it's important that the Board be operating at the top of its game when the new Head arrives. We recommend that the Committee on Trustees be assigned the task of reviewing the Board's recent performance, identifying potential threats to a healthy Board-Head relationship, and leading the Board in a discussion of steps it can take to strengthen its own performance if necessary. This review is particularly important if governance issues contributed to the departure of the outgoing Head. But even schools undergoing a completely amicable and orderly transition can benefit from a review of Board practice. Among the questions that should be asked as part of this review process are the following:

1. Does the Board have an effective process in place to identify potential new trustees? How deep is the bench? With a new Head of School about to arrive, there's no time like the present to fill the leadership pipeline with wise and knowledgeable trustee candidates who are deeply committed to the school.
2. Are new trustees effectively oriented to their roles and responsibilities? Particularly important at the time of a new Head's arrival is a clear policy governing how trustees will respond to the criticisms or complaints they will invariably hear from disgruntled parents and faculty members as the new Head settles in. We believe that trustees should be advised to bring any such information to the President of the Board rather than directly to the Head. The President can then determine whether and how this information should be brought to the Head's attention.
3. Are trustees who behave in inappropriate ways counseled promptly and removed if necessary?
4. Is the confidentiality of Board deliberations an issue?
5. Does the Board maintain an up-to-date policy manual codifying its position on essential issues?
6. Is there a well-documented Head of School evaluation process in place? If not, the time to create one is now. There is nothing more disconcerting for a new Head than to have the Board suddenly raise the issue of an evaluation well into the school year and, often, on the heels of some brewing controversy. It is far better to design an evaluation process early on that is linked to the Charge to the Head and clear in laying out how the Board intends to define success.

This is also an appropriate time to review the key initiatives under consideration at the Board level to discuss which should be fast-tracked and which might be better tabled until the new Head's arrival.

Examples might include a languishing strategic planning process, facilities upgrades or land purchases, a capital campaign, settlement of a lawsuit, etc. The Board leadership should also work with the outgoing Head to defuse any landmines that might explode later if not resolved now. Items in this category might include necessary austerity measures, tuition hikes, or the dismissal of underperforming employees.

5. Deploy a Transition Team

More than one new Head of School has gotten off to an unnecessarily rocky start because of a political stumble that could have been avoided. To help the new Head make the best possible first impression, the President of the Board should appoint a carefully selected Transition Committee whose members will serve as guides and perhaps, occasionally, as guardian angels.

The Transition Committee need not be large, but the choice of its members is critical. The group should include individuals who are widely respected and well connected in both the school community and the larger community in which the school operates. The incoming President of the Board is a logical choice, and the Head's Executive Assistant could provide invaluable help. Also important are one or two members with a flair for arranging successful social and ceremonial events.

Among the immediate tasks with which this group should be charged are the following:

- Ensuring that the new Head receives all needed relocation assistance pertaining to housing, employment opportunities for his or her spouse, and guidance in the areas of school placement or child care, if needed.
- Planning the installation ceremony.
- Introducing the new leader to Heads of other independent schools in the area.

Next, the committee should ask itself: What – and whom – does a newcomer to this school community need to know to function smoothly? The group should develop a list of key people within the school community to whom the new Head should be introduced as soon as possible. Business meetings or small social gatherings can then be planned to accomplish the introductions. This group might include large or long-time donors, former trustees who have recently rotated off the Board, particularly influential parents or teachers, or retired faculty members who remain beloved in the community. Prior to each of the meetings, members of the committee should brief the Head about the particulars of each participant's relationship with the school.

The arrival of a new Head presents an opportunity to win back the loyalties of former school supporters who had become disaffected (alumni who broke off ties after a switch to coeducation, for example, or a donor who has opted not to fulfill a pledge because of a disagreement with the school's leadership). Making an effort to introduce the new Head to persons in these categories could mark a new beginning in their relationship with the school. Similarly, some schools experience thorny relationships with homeowners living in close proximity to school property. A courtesy call from the new Head before problems arise could pay dividends later.

An effective transition committee serves two vital roles. First, it can help the Head to avoid major mistakes early in his or her tenure. More importantly, though, the work of this committee sends a message to the school community that the new Head is not operating in isolation, but is supported by and is an integral part of a Board-Head leadership team.

6. Schedule a Kickoff Retreat

One excellent tool for launching the new Head's tenure is a late-summer retreat that brings the new Head together with the administration, the Board of Trustees, and perhaps senior faculty members for an open exchange of ideas about the school's most pressing needs. The summer retreat serves several purposes:

1. It strengthens relationships among the Board, faculty, and administration, and promotes greater understanding of the unique perspectives of each group among members of the other groups.
2. It helps the new Head to become acquainted with key members of the school community and to gain a greater understanding of their interactions with one another in a relatively non-threatening setting.
3. It provides the Head with valuable information about the range of perspectives within and across various constituent groups with respect to key issues facing the school.
4. It helps all participants to begin the school year with a sense of inclusion, common purpose, and mutual understanding.

The event, which might be scheduled over a day and a half, should include ample opportunities for relaxed social interchanges as well as for structured conversations about the needs of the school. The Board President can kick off the event with a welcoming address identifying the purposes of the retreat and reiterating the Board's excitement about the arrival of the new leader and its sense of optimism about the future.

After the initial plenary session, the participants should be divided into smaller groups, each of which should include trustees, faculty members, and administrators. During most of the retreat, the new Head should function primarily as a listener and observer, moving among the breakout groups and contributing where appropriate without driving the discussions. Discussion topics will vary depending upon the school's situation with respect to previous planning efforts. If a strategic plan or accreditation self-study has been completed recently, items for discussion can be drawn from the major goals identified in those documents. If no up-to-date planning documents exist, the retreat agenda can be designed to elicit a list of major goals the school should pursue in the years ahead.

The final item on the retreat agenda should be closing remarks from the new Head of School in which the Head summarizes what he or she has heard during the retreat, offers some personal observations about the issues discussed, and describes in broad terms how he or she intends to proceed in the months ahead.

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Having taken the steps necessary to lay a solid foundation for the transition, the Board should now be well positioned to enjoy the fruits of your labors – the opportunity to participate with your Head in the bright promise inherent in new leadership.

Founded in 1986, Wickenden Associates has conducted more than 300 Head of School searches for independent and charter schools located throughout the U.S. and abroad. For information about our leadership search and other consulting services, contact Wickenden Associates President Jim Wickenden (jwickenden@wickenden.com) at 609 683 1355.

This and other articles of interest to independent school Heads, Trustees, and aspiring school leaders are available in our online library (www.wickenden.com/library.html).
