



WHAT'S NEXT?

**AFTER THE APPOINTMENT, PAVING THE WAY FOR YOUR
NEW HEAD'S SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION**

*1000 Herrontown Road, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-7716 Tel: 609-683-1355 Fax: 609-683-1351
Website: www.wickenden.com Email: searches@wickenden.com*

Looking Back on Their Own Experiences, Heads Offer Transition Advice to Boards

In 2002-03, Wickenden Associates conducted an extensive survey of independent school Heads, asking them to tell us about their initial experiences as Heads of Schools. We received responses from 420 Heads, who provided us with a wealth of information. (A summary report is available on our website, www.wickenden.com.)

As part of that survey, we asked the Heads: *What do you think Boards of Trustees can and should do to help ensure the success of a first-time Head? What should they avoid doing?* Although the survey was focused specifically on the first headship, we believe their advice applies equally well in any headship transition.

Here is a summary of their responses, organized by frequency of mention:

How The Board Can Help:

1. Support, nurture, and demonstrate confidence in the new Head.
2. Be a nonjudgmental sounding board – ask questions, stay in touch, keep confidences.
3. Set clear, achievable, limited goals and expectations.
4. Give the Head time and room to succeed.
5. Offer visible public support.
6. Create a transition team.
7. Be sensitive to the Head's personal and family needs.
8. Work hard at being a professional, effective Board.
9. Appoint a great Chair/Executive Committee committed to the Head's success.
10. Provide professional development opportunities, consulting support as needed, and a mentor.
11. Introduce the Head to key players in the school family and the community.
12. Be a source of information about the school's history and culture; be honest.
13. Raise money and take the initiative in strategic planning.
14. Establish a clear evaluation process.

What Boards Should Avoid Doing:

1. Micromanaging; becoming too involved in the day-to-day affairs of the school. (This, by the way, was the landslide winner in terms of advice.)
2. Seeking feedback on the Head's performance from constituents; suggesting they lack confidence in the new Head; permitting end runs.
3. Pursuing personal agendas; wearing their "parent hats."
4. Adding to the Head's workload by scheduling too many committee meetings and social obligations.
5. Second-guessing the Head's decisions.
6. Resisting the Head's initiatives; drawing comparisons to the previous Head.

After the Appointment: A Transition Checklist

The appointment of the new Head marks the end of the search process and the beginning of a process of transition from old leadership to new. Like the search itself, the transition proceeds best if the Board of Trustees is actively engaged in ensuring its successful outcome. Here, in brief, are several concrete steps the Board can take to set the stage for a successful start to the new Head's tenure. In the pages that follow, we discuss each of these items in more detail.

Immediately After the Appointment

- Announce the appointment to the school family and the local media.
- Establish a Transition Committee to provide relocation assistance and begin planning the introduction of the new Head to the school family and the local community.

Prior to the New Head's Starting Date

- Confer with the new Head about desired immediate professional development (e.g., the NAIS New Heads Workshop held each summer for first-time Heads of School).
- Create or review and revise the Charge to the Head.
- Develop a Head evaluation process and timetable.
- Conduct a Board self-evaluation and governance tune-up to ensure that all trustees understand their roles and responsibilities.
- Resolve nagging personnel issues and other potential landmines for the new Head.
- Involve the new Head, as appropriate, in important decisions about hiring of new personnel, etc.
- Arrange an appropriate farewell for the departing Head of School.

Upon the New Head's Arrival

- Arrange a series of small social gatherings to introduce the Head and spouse to key members of the school family and the broader community, including other Heads of area schools.
- Plan a late-summer retreat to bring together the new Head, the Board of Trustees, the new administrative team, and perhaps senior members of the faculty.
- Stage an installation ceremony.
- Establish a discretionary fund to permit the new Head some flexibility in responding to needs he or she identifies as pressing.
- Consider retaining a new auditing firm and requesting a comprehensive management letter.

Throughout the Head's First Year – and Beyond

- Provide public support and private counsel.
- Respect the Head's prerogatives.
- Reward performance.

Phase I: Immediately After the Appointment

Announce the Appointment. The appointment of a new Head is an excellent public relations opportunity that should not be missed. First, a trustee or the school's Communications Director should prepare an announcement letter from the Board President to be sent to faculty, current parents, current and former trustees, major donors, and alumni, and mounted on the school website. Next, a press release with photo should be prepared and distributed to local media outlets.

Following the announcement, many schools feature an extended interview with the new Head and his or her family in a regularly scheduled school publication or in a specially designed piece. Asking the new Head to sit for an interview with the student newspaper is another good public relations move.

Thank All Who Participated in the Process. Head of School searches involve scores of people. Many give willingly of their time and opinions to provide the Search Committee with various forms of assistance. All who contributed to the success of the search deserve to be publicly recognized and personally thanked. Although time-consuming, formal thank-you letters from the Board President and/or the Search Chair should be sent to those who made significant contributions.

Brief the Board. The search for a new Head of School provides a window into many areas of school life. As a result, the Search Committee usually comes out of a search knowing far more about the school than other Board members. Those not directly involved in the search process might not have had the opportunity to review the Opportunity Statement in great detail or to listen to the varied perspectives of the candidates on potential solutions to issues facing the school.

To ensure that these insights are not lost and to minimize the development of a "we-they" feeling among the trustees, the chair of the Search Committee should deliver a comprehensive report to the entire Board about what was learned during the course of the search.

Appoint a Transition Committee. 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 be chaired by a trustee and 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. Also important are one or two members of the community with a flair for arranging successful social events. We suggest that this Transition Committee include, but not necessarily be limited to, a Search Committee representative, a trustee, a faculty member, an administrator, a representative from the Development Office, a parent, the Head of School's secretary/assistant, a student, and an alumnus/a. Depending upon the circumstances of the outgoing Head's departure, he or she could be an invaluable member of the group.

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. Another major role for the Transition Committee is to help the Head's spouse become familiar with the community and its resources. While the orientation program for the spouse should obviously reflect his or her interests, the Transition Committee should also be prepared to help the Head's family become familiar with the local health services, financial institutions, restaurants, religious institutions, schools, stores, and recreational facilities. Also, the person who volunteers to orient the spouse could also provide introductions to people in the community with similar interests.
- Planning an installation ceremony to take place at the beginning of the new school year. The ceremony should reflect both the new Head's wishes and the culture of the school. Some schools plan a very formal installation; others lean more toward an informal celebratory event.
- Introducing the new leader to Heads of other independent schools in the area.

Next, the committee should ask itself: *What – and who – 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 also 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, many 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.

Phase II: Prior to the New Head's Starting Date

Ultimately, the quality of the Board-Head relationship is likely to be the defining factor in your new Head's success, so it is well worth the Board's time to ensure that expectations on both sides are clearly articulated. The steps below will contribute a great deal to promoting a healthy start to the relationship.

Prior to the new Head's arrival, the Board should:

Prepare and Publish the Charge to the Head. Ideally, this document would have been developed as part of the search process. If that has not been done, now is the time to make it happen. Why is this so important? First, one of the Board's responsibilities is to guide the Head of School. The Charge to the Head fulfills that purpose. Second, the work of a Head of School is never done. Without direction from the Board, the Head is likely to pursue an agenda that interests him or her, or react to the issues of the moment as advanced by determined faculty members or parents.

The Charge should be developed in collaboration with the new Head, approved by the full Board, and then disseminated in some form to the faculty and parents so that the entire school community is operating under the same set of expectations regarding the Head's priorities. For the Head's first year, the Board should err on the side of a very limited to-do list. This is not the time for the Head to be asked to make controversial or unpopular changes. Instead, the Board should encourage the Head to take time to listen and learn about the school's unique culture and idiosyncrasies and to build trust and relationships.

Establish an Evaluation Process and Timetable. Now, in the glow of the transition honeymoon, is also the best time to establish how and when the Head will be evaluated. 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.

Much has been written about evaluation processes for Heads of School. Like others, we believe that the Head should be evaluated annually, that the evaluation should be based on criteria developed jointly by the Head and the Board, that the entire Board should be given the opportunity to respond to the criteria on which the evaluation is based, that the evaluation should be shared with the Head orally and in writing, and that the evaluation should be forward-looking as well as retrospective. For the Head's first year, we believe it makes good sense to schedule interim evaluations at the three-month and six-month points, so that the Board can advise the Head if any midcourse corrections are necessary. We also believe that a legitimate evaluation process must rest on a well-developed plan for professional development.

Plan for the Head's Professional Development. Boards should not assume that people become Heads only after they have mastered all the requisite administrative, academic, and leadership skills. Everyone, including your next Head, has gaps in their skill set or experience base. Too often, these

inevitable shortcomings are addressed only *after* they become a source of discontent and then only in the context of the Head's evaluation.

Most independent schools claim as part of their mission a commitment to developing in their students a lifelong love of learning. There is no better way to model this commitment than to encourage the ongoing personal and professional growth of the school's leader. The Board should set a tone that encourages the new Head to identify areas in which he or she needs to improve knowledge or skills. This process should begin even before the Head arrives on campus.

First-time Heads should be encouraged to attend the National Association of Independent Schools' *New Heads Workshop* (past participants speak highly of this intensive seminar, which provides an opportunity for first-time Heads to develop their skills and form an ongoing support network). The Head and Board Chair may also want to consider attending the NAIS Leadership Through Partnership program, typically held each fall and specifically designed to forge a strong and productive working relationship between these two key school leaders.

Experienced Heads might be asked if they would like to pursue any additional training, particularly in areas related to the specific challenges facing the school. If the school is about to embark upon a large-scale building effort, for example, a Head who has not previously overseen major construction projects might find it valuable to attend a seminar on that topic.

If the new Head is going to be dealing with a complex, long-term issue (e.g., an ambitious effort to upgrade technology throughout the school), the Board should also be open to employing the services of a specialized consultant to assist the Head.

Some Heads find it valuable to set aside time to visit similar schools headed by well-respected professionals, simply to observe them at their work.

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.

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. *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:

- 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.

- Are trustees who behave in inappropriate ways counseled promptly and removed if necessary?
- Is the confidentiality of Board deliberations an issue?
- Does the Board maintain an up-to-date policy manual codifying its position on essential issues?
- What information does the Board expect to receive from the Head on a regular basis? Relatively few Boards take the time to define the information they need in order to ensure that the school is fulfilling its mission and that the school and the Head are making progress toward the achievement of institutional goals. As Richard Chait, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, notes, "Boards should not simply ask the administration for more information. Boards should define the information they want in a format that will be useful and that does not require hours of study to analyze and understand. Instead, the Board should receive information in a format similar to what the driver of a car receives when glancing at the dashboard. There should be seven to ten indicators that the Board should review regularly to determine how well the school is functioning."
- Does the Board have a process in place for communicating with school constituencies? In our consulting assignments with independent schools, faculty and parents frequently tell us that they do not know what the Board does. If trustees want to improve communications with the faculty and the parents, we recommend that, at a minimum, the Board President and/or various committee chairs contribute a column to the school's monthly newsletter. This provides an opportunity for the Board to articulate its goals and reinforce the knowledge that the Head is operating at the Board's behest.

Resolve Nagging Issues. The psychic energy required to fire a faculty or staff member is not to be underestimated. Restructuring a division or appointing new department chairs usually generates enough political fallout to exhaust even the strongest of Heads. Because of the consequences of decisions such as these, many Heads postpone making tough choices during their first year, rationalizing that the situation really is not that bad or that it can be handled next year. Unfortunately, this approach – while probably prudent as a survival strategy for the new Head – might not be in the best interests of the school.

A better technique might be for the President of the Board to confer with the outgoing Head to decide which unresolved problems should be dealt with before the new Head arrives. *The Board must give the new Head every opportunity to succeed.* Unnecessarily saddling him or her with lingering personnel problems will make the transition year even more difficult.

Involve the New Head in Key Decisions. Although they do not usually begin their tenure officially until the summertime, newly appointed Heads can and should be consulted about important decisions that need to be made in the spring prior to their arrival. It is not uncommon, for

example, to involve the Head in hiring decisions for key administrative positions that must be filled.

Refrain from Giving Away the Store. Departing Heads want to be remembered fondly. In particular, most would like to leave with the feeling that the faculty appreciated their leadership. To achieve this goal, outgoing Heads sometimes press for significant raises for the faculty. While that may improve the status of the “revered old Head,” it can also make life extraordinarily difficult for the new one.

The most likely outcome of such a generous gesture is that the new Head will be required the following year to hike tuition while keeping faculty raises to a minimum. In the process, the new Head will incur the wrath of two powerful constituencies — parents and faculty — simultaneously. What a way to begin!

Arrange an Appropriate Farewell for the Departing Head. In all of the excitement surrounding the new Head’s arrival, it is important to ensure that the departing Head is also appropriately thanked for his or her contributions. What is appropriate varies widely from school to school, depending upon the circumstances of the departure and the length of the Head’s tenure. In addition to personally thanking the Head and his or her family for their service to the school, many schools use this as an opportunity to solicit funds for a purpose near and dear to the Head’s heart.

Phase III: Upon the New Head's Arrival

All too often, the new Head of School arrives on campus in July, goes to his or her office, and then tries to figure out how to connect with the school community. From our standpoint, it would be exceptionally helpful to the new Head if the Transition Committee were to arrange appointments with key people in the school community, especially the major donors, potential donors, former trustees, current and former Presidents of the Parents Association, officers of the Alumni Association, retired leaders of the school who live in the community, and Heads of other independent schools in the area. The Transition Committee should also determine who will accompany the Head on certain visits to make introductions and to ensure that whatever commitments are made during these meetings are duly recorded and subsequently followed up on.

All of these appointments, of course, have to be scheduled around the vitally important time that the Head must spend early on with the administrative team, the faculty, and the staff. Having the Head's assistant serve on the Transition Committee should help to avoid scheduling conflicts and/or a set of commitments that would exhaust the Head during his or her first few months on the job.

Establish Ground Rules for the Board President-Head Relationship. Because this is arguably the most important relationship the new Head will forge, it is vital that the two parties agree on a regular communication schedule that meets the needs of both parties. Some Board Presidents and Heads speak every day; others schedule weekly or biweekly meetings. The important thing is that the principle of “no surprises” be scrupulously observed. Developing a sense of trust in this relationship will enable the new Head to brainstorm about complex issues without fear.

Plan a Summer Retreat. One excellent tool for kicking off 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 improves 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. 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 year ahead.

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.

Reconvening in plenary session, the participants should then hear reports from representatives of each small group. 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 addressing goals identified during the retreat.

Provide Some Budgetary Flexibility. As we all know, a budget is a planning document. But not everything goes according to plan. Thus, the new Head should be provided with a contingency fund to handle the unexpected. If the budget is so tight that the only recourse open to the Head is to reduce funds already allocated to a particular program, those affected will inevitably be critical of the new leadership. Arriving with a "fresh eye," the new Head also is likely to identify some deficiency he or she would like to address without delay – new furniture for the faculty lounge, for example – that could earn the Head some immediate good will.

Change the School's Auditor. Unfortunately, we have heard too many stories about newly appointed Heads of School being blindsided by the financial condition of the school they were hired to lead. Once such financial problems have been identified, trustees usually direct the Head to address the situation. Clearly, this is not a good way for a leader to start. To be fully informed about the financial condition of the school, a newly appointed Head of School – with the approval of the Board – would be wise to consider retaining a new auditing firm. While this can be time-consuming and expensive, it can also provide the Head with a solid start in the financial arena. The new auditing firm should be charged with scrutinizing the finances of the school and with writing a lengthy and informative "management letter." If appropriate, the auditors should be invited to a Board meeting to explain their findings and to make recommendations about how any problems might be resolved.

Stage the Inaugural Ceremony. The Transition Committee should work with the Head to plan an event that will energize the school community while providing the Head with a good opportunity to introduce himself or herself to all.

Phase IV: Throughout the First Year – and Beyond

One of the best gifts that trustees can give the new Head is the gift of time. New Heads need to see and be seen by all constituencies of the school. They need to feel free to listen and learn without the pressure of expectations that they will immediately address the major challenges facing the school. While most trustees are understandably energized by new leadership and eager to move the school forward, this may be a time for the Board to limit its demands on the Head. Multiple Board committee meetings can drain even the most energetic of school leaders, and their time is probably better spent in the opening months of their tenure engaging with the faculty, parents, and students.

Whenever a new leader is appointed, an organization experiences change. Sometimes the change is driven by the Board, sometimes by a newly approved strategic plan, and sometimes by the interests and special strengths of the new leader. Regardless of the reasons for the change, trustees should remember that with any change comes some loss. And when loss occurs, frustration and criticism follow. Given this, the Board is responsible not only for defining and communicating its goals, but also for ensuring that the Head's goals are similarly defined and communicated. The Board should also be prepared for negative feedback as those adversely affected by change vent their frustration. While we are not suggesting that the Board give the new Head a free pass by supporting whatever he or she does – mistakes will be made and course corrections required – we do urge trustees to be prepared for some negative fallout, especially during the winter doldrums.

Respect the Head's Prerogatives. All Heads provoke negative responses from one-issue people and from those championing a cause inconsistent with the school's mission or the Board's intended direction. To support the Head, the Board must publicly and privately discourage end runs by parents or faculty who want to vent their spleens. How this is done has to be determined by the President. The fact that it's not easy is no excuse for not tackling the problem. If the Board makes itself available to parents and faculty who are critical of the Head, the Head will soon be rendered impotent. The Head will be reluctant to take the initiative or tackle difficult decisions. Unfortunately, when this situation emerges, a change in leadership usually becomes inevitable. This is especially regrettable because it is the Board itself that will have sown the seeds of the Head's ineffectiveness.

Offer Friendship and Support. We've never met a successful Head who did not love the school and devote long hours to it. This willingness to spend long hours on the job, however, can be debilitating. Just as the Board is responsible for the health of the school, so it is responsible to some extent for the health of the Head. The Board cannot allow the Head to engage in long-term behaviors that sap energy, and should insist that periodic breaks occur for energy and spirits to rise.

Board support can be expressed in other vitally important ways. Regular contact between the President of the Board and the Head can lead to long and valued friendships. Because of the isolating nature of the Head's position within the school, many Heads say they tend to form their closest personal relationships with trustees. And the Board that takes a genuine interest in the needs of the Head's spouse and children will often be rewarded with a loyalty that manifests itself in the Head's reluctance to investigate other job opportunities.

Reward Performance. Increasingly, Boards are demonstrating their support of outstanding Heads by awarding them bonuses and/or multi-year contracts. While long-term contracts should not be handed out indiscriminately, effective leaders deserve to be rewarded with some job security. Serving as a Head of School is extraordinarily difficult, not only because of the multiple demands of the position but also because Heads find themselves working for different bosses (i.e. new Board Chairs) every few years.

Horror stories abound about school leaders who were awarded long-term contracts by one Board President only to be summarily dismissed by the next. Given the small size of the independent school world, it takes little time for the rumor mill to get up to speed. Boards with a reputation for being difficult surely will have trouble finding outstanding candidates.

Conversely, a Board that takes the time and trouble to set the stage properly for the new Head's arrival, attend to his or her professional needs, and demonstrate solid support for the leader publicly and behind the scenes will earn for its school a well-deserved reputation that will make it far easier to attract topnotch candidates. More importantly, a Board that earns itself this reputation will probably find that it need not attract them quite so often.

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