

Out the Door: What We Can Learn from Abrupt Departures from Headship

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As the 2017-18 school year began, an unprecedented number of new heads in Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS) schools followed predecessors who departed with notice of less than two months. We saw this abrupt departure phenomenon spike from 14% in recent years to a whopping 38% in fall 2017. The emerging data for fall 2018 appears to be trending in the same direction. Many of my colleagues in other state and regional associations anecdotally report similar patterns. This escalation in unplanned departures has occurred in a context of relatively stable overall headship turnover in our region and in the nation. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) reports average tenure of approximately 8½ years since fall of 2016.

Many of these departures were firings or resignations at the board's request, though very few appear to be the result of cause that would be characterized as an ethical or legal breach. While ISACS found no pattern in length of tenure among these quick exits, NAIS reports that new heads represent an increasing portion of head turnover, from 42% in 2016 to 60% in 2018.

Why is abrupt departure a concern?

Unlike most other small businesses, good schools are focused on nurturing personal growth, and relationships are fundamental to that work. The head plays an important role in setting a climate of care, support, and continuity. So, a quick ouster can be disruptive in unhealthy ways.

In his *Independent School* article of Spring 2015, "Changing Horses in Midstream," Lee Quinby, Executive Director of the Association of Colorado Independent Schools, captures this well:

"[T]he rash decision to fire the head halts institutional momentum and generates constituent anxiety that weakens the school....Discarding a head of school, instead of engaging constituents in a carefully managed transition process, can tear the fabric of relational trust that holds the community together."

Why would the board risk such a tear if it could be avoided?

I have several theories.

Labile landscape. In keynote remarks at recent conferences, both Donna Orem and Caroline Blackwell of NAIS used the military and organizational leadership term "VUCA" – *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity* – to describe our current national climate and the context in which our schools are operating. It appears that we may have left behind, at least temporarily, a kinder and gentler time.

Unrealistic expectations. There is some evidence to suggest that abrupt turnover is increasing in the corporate world as well. In a 2016 article in *The New Yorker*, "Why CEOs are Getting Fired More" (originally entitled "Uneasy Lies the Head," interestingly enough), James Surowiecki reports that forced turnover in the corporate ranks tripled between 1970 and 2006. He suggests that the combination of an increasingly prevalent belief that "having the right person at the top is the key to success" and more generous CEO salaries have led to higher expectations for performance and less patience when key quantitative goals have not been reached.

In this context, leadership candidates who over promise, including marketing themselves as "thought leaders," may increase their vulnerability. "It is not surprising that those who imagine themselves to be organizational saviors tend to have short tenures," says Allison Vaillancourt, discussing the same

phenomenon in higher education in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* appropriately entitled “You’re No Messiah.”

This seems an accurate description of the circumstances for some recent abrupt headship departures. Board chairs report welcoming the new head with high hopes and then finding that quantitative goals were not being reached – admission numbers were off, student attrition was up, fund raising was down – and the board believed that the school did not have the benefit of time to offer the head a long exit ramp.

Enrollment management and financial sustainability stressors. While median enrollment among NAIS and ISACS schools has rebounded since 2008, individual schools in both cohorts wrestle with sustainability questions, and data indicate that enrollment in kindergarten through third grade is down.

The 2012-2013 NAIS Governance Survey, *Heads and Boards Working in Partnership*, reported enrollment management as the most prevalent concern of both heads and board chairs, followed close behind by marketing and branding (showing the value-add of an independent education); recruiting, retaining, and compensating quality faculty; and developing a sound five-year financial plan.

Those stressors are still with us, it would appear.

Generational shift. The arrival of Millennials (those born from 1981-1995 according to the U.S. Census Bureau) in our parent populations and on our boards may have a part to play. Much of the literature on generational characteristics in the workplace suggests that, compared to their Gen X compatriots, Millennials have increased expectations for customized experiences and less patience for the needs of the group.

In “Managing Millennials: Embracing Generational Differences,” Jeanine S. Stewart and her co-authors present research to suggest that Millennials have a greater need to be shown how their contributions fit into the larger context of an organization – a link they are less likely to make on their own as compared to their counterparts.

If the relationship of the individual to the school is changing, whether in an expectation of greater accommodation or a greater disconnect with how one’s work affects the collaborative enterprise, this certainly could be having an impact on heads’ tenures and departure timetables.

The Yelp effect. Interested in understanding the abrupt departure phenomenon in my own region, I convened two heads focus groups on the topic. An increase in a customer-service orientation in schools was a universal observation, and I noted that this seems to be both symptom of and fuel for the generational shift described above. We market our schools more aggressively, and we survey frequently to assess the extent to which parents are happy, creating a dynamic characterized by a colleague as “the Yelp effect.”

In his March 2018 newsletter, independent school consultant John Littleford notes the detrimental effect of using 360-degree community surveys for performance evaluation of the head. He makes the case that inherent in independent schools is a distinct circle of influence, particularly when parents are the “dominant force” on the board: *head reports to trustees -- whose children are influenced by the employees -- who report to the head.*

We can forget that the head’s job is not, first and foremost, to keep everyone pleased but, rather, to sustain a healthy school that fills its mission, balancing competing interests and needs within that context.

Failure to fully embrace a partnership model. In one of those focus group discussions, I was lamenting aloud about my perception that some heads are inclined to neglect the need to communicate clearly what they need to fully implement the shared vision and strategic plan, particularly when it requires managing the agendas of the board and committees and coaching their leadership. I referred to this aspect of the head’s work using the popular vernacular of “managing up.”

Steve Freedman, head at Hillel Day School (MI) and participant in both discussion groups, made the point that that the turn of phrase conveys a part of the problem. We need to think of the work of head and

board much more as a partnership – and convey that in our language as well as our actions. He urged that we more clearly envision head and board as having distinct roles in serving a common mission.

The framing of goals for the head of school may be another contributing factor. Increasingly, I see boards attempting to define the head's success in terms of quantifiable outcomes at the expense of understanding the contextual, qualitative aspects of the work. Goals that assign to the head of school "enrollment growth of 15%," for instance, fail to recognize shared responsibility for strategic direction and the potential impact of outside factors. Attaching a pay bonus to that growth exacerbates the problem.

What to do?

Continue to collect and interpret data. Associations must continue to collect data to better understand what trends may be emerging and share those findings with boards and heads in their care.

Avoid creating an emergency. When the board-head relationship is strained, the board chair and/or head should seek help. If the head was recently hired, they might reach out to the search consultant for help in navigating the challenges. Typically, regional independent school associations executives are available for counsel. There is a critical need to seek intervention before differences are irreconcilable.

Grow leaders better able to thrive. We need to step up our work in preparing the next generation of school leaders. Universities, associations, schools, and, arguably, search firms need to orient aspiring and new heads to the realities of independent school advancement, financial management, and effective partnership with the board. This includes helping heads understand the importance of putting in place a pro-active routine for communication with the board, regular practices for enlisting trustee support for the work of the headship, and mechanisms for guiding trustees to fill their roles effectively.

Develop board-head agreements on meaningful shared goals and metrics to assess progress. We need to point boards in the direction of more productive data points. In that March 2018 article, Littleford suggests a number of appropriate measures to consider including enrollment and student retention, budget balance, fundraising results, college or secondary school placement, alumni/ae support and giving, and creative programming. I'd add faculty retention to this list.

Cultivate empathy and trust. Trustees need to strive for partnership with the head of school, beginning by leaning into Stephen Covey's principle, "Seek first to understand." "Surviving and Thriving as a Head of School," Michael Thompson and Rick Melvoin's 2005 article written for heads as audience, should be required reading for all new trustees in order to build empathy for the nature of headship. In turn, heads need to actively cultivate a relationship with the board that includes direct and honest exchange about needs and challenges, built on a foundation of mutual respect, an understanding of respective roles, and shared mission.

In my experience, new heads often look askance when the suggestion is made to meet one-on-one with each trustee every year, so eager are they to focus on leading the school. Yet, independent school leadership relies on a strong board-head relationship as its bedrock. I continue to assert that there is no time better spent than annual rounds by the head to each trustee – ideally in the trustee's environment.

Establish a regular practice of board education and shared self-reflection. In a recent conversation about the abrupt departure phenomenon, Susan Decker, BoardSource consultant, emphasized three fundamental goals of high functioning boards of nonprofits:

- *Developing a positive board culture;*
- *Building a constructive partnership with the chief executive;*
- *Engaging in intentional practice and ongoing board development.*

If we can work together to strengthen school governance in these areas, we will be well on our way to smoother leadership transitions.

Further Reading

1. *Leading with intent: 2017 national index of nonprofit board practices*. BoardSource, 2017.
2. Littleford, J. *Controversial topics: 360 evaluation and executive session*. March 2018.
3. Melvoin, R., & Thompson, M. "Surviving, thriving, and sometimes just enduring as a head of school." *Independent School*, NAIS, Winter 2005.
4. *NAIS 2012-2013 Governance Study: Heads and boards working in partnership*. NAIS, 2013.
5. Quinby, L. "Changing horses in midstream: The dangers of unplanned head transitions." *Independent School*, NAIS, Spring 2015.
6. Stewart, J., et al. "Managing millennials: Embracing generational differences." *Business Horizons*, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, 2016.
7. Surowiecki, J. "Why C.E.O.s are getting fired more." *The New Yorker*, 11/07/16.
8. Vaillancourt, A. "You're no messiah." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8/01/16.

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