

ISACS VTL Training Case Studies

#1 – Board Governance

Headly Academy is small grade 7-12 school of 180 students in a market where Fortune 500 companies breed board members for the school. Their mission reads, “Headly provides rigorous preparation for life and college in a nurturing atmosphere.” Don Hickey is a relatively new head in his third year. The self-study includes all the right language explaining that Headly demonstrates effective boundaries between the governance role of the board and the role of the school head as the manager of day-to-day operations. After meeting with the head on various occasions, you begin to get a sense that there may be some conflict with the board. After some nice platitudes to begin the trustee meeting, a member suggests that a 360 evaluation is necessary for the head of school. He supports this by explaining that teachers he has talked to are tired of project-based real world learning and quotes research to support a return to the tried and true way of doing things.

2 – Audit & Safety

Entering Smallville School via a different entrance than the one used during your pre-visit, you noticed that there is no intercom on the front of the school. You inquire of your tour guide before the Sunday reception if the front doors are usually locked. You learn from this fifth grade student that Smallville is an inclusive PK – 5 community and no one gets locked out. Even on a Sunday evening, you notice a variety of people coming and going through the door – some of whom seem to have no contact whatsoever with anyone on the staff. Sipping your pinot noir you casually ask about the parade of visitors and learn that the relationship with the local community is so strong that neighbors are welcome to use the facilities whenever they are available. There are no fees for usage. When you return to your meeting room at the hotel, you glance through papers provided and realize the school is in a somewhat precarious financial place – renting the facility may help in some ways you muse. You look for the audit to support your inclination. You cannot find it.

3 – Mission & Tone

Patell Day is an interfaith school located in the heart of Detroit. The young students in this PK – 5 grade school represent a variety of identities via race, faith and gender identification. The teachers also represent a diverse group but somewhat different from the students. They have a number of parent conflicts and board concerns surrounding diversity and have identified those as areas that require some objective support from the Visiting Team. During your pre-visit, you enjoy their efforts to use conflicts that arise as teachable moments. From your vantage as a progressive head, you can see what a difference this is making not only in the lives of the students, but also in their families. You eagerly await the arrival of your team for your orientation meeting. As they file in and introduce themselves and their schools, you realize most come from conservative, traditional schools – even those from the elementary ones.

4 -- Major Recommendations & Strategic Planning

The Bournley School is a pillar of the ISACS community. A K-12 school with a long tradition of excellence and strong outcomes: stellar college acceptances, high test scores, satisfied parents. You were proud to have even been chosen to get an inside view of this institution whose reputation stands out among its peers. When you read their school profile form, the font has to be so small to fit the large numbers, which represent their endowment and their annual fund. You salivate with envy. During your pre-visit the head tells you that they are about to begin a new cycle when asked to see the school's strategic plan. Now that you are sitting inside these hallowed walls, you realize that the last plan expired seven years ago coinciding with the last ISACS team visit. As your team lingers late in the afternoon before heading to a faculty meeting, many share their initial ideas for major commendations and recommendations. As you listen a pattern emerges...the same one that was evident in the recommendations sprinkled throughout the last Visiting Team Report.

5 -- Managing the Team

Thermos Academy prides itself on being a five-day boarding and day school for students in grades 5 – 12. Its mission reads, "Thermos is a college-preparatory school for those students who thrive in the company of other great minds." Founded by the CEO of Thermos LLC in 1914, the school believes strongly that children need access to good nutrition and filtered water throughout their learning – signs reading "hydration matters" hang above every bottle filling station. Every time the workroom door shuts, the team questions the independence of the school because of the use of the Thermos tagline as inspiration in the school halls. Members pore over curriculum maps and find gaps and omissions in their college preparation timeline. Others complain about the poor selection at lunch compared to what is offered at their own school. As you gather the team, everyone has had at least two conversations with unhappy faculty members who feel the school is on the wrong path – either academically or in the very essence of its independence.