The Unique Benefits of Teaching in an Independent School

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a challenging and noble profession. That is true in both public and private schools. The purpose of this white paper is to affirm the value of all teachers while focusing on the unique benefits of teaching in an independent school. People who have an association with a private school know they cannot view these academic institutions through rose-colored glasses. Independent schools are not perfect. In spite of this reality, we thirteen who gathered to address the topic "The Benefits of Teaching in an Independent School" decided to focus not on an independent school’s difficulties and challenges, but instead on the ways these institutions invigorate us and bring out the best in our human natures.

The landscape of our professional lives is diverse. Our differences—male, female, older, younger, secondary, middle and elementary—enrich our collaboration and deepen our perspective. Our shared anecdotes reignited our enthusiasm for the profession of teaching.

Although many kinds of educators may profit from this report, prospective private school teachers will find it especially enlightening, gaining an insider’s view of what we value.

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For anyone else who is currently engaged in these environments, we hope our report will confirm what is best in private schools.

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

Independent schools are intentional communities. Defined by their visions and chosen by their members, who come to have a sense of ownership, each school was created with a purpose and is guided by its mission. The ethos of the school is its character as shaped by its core values, complemented by its history and traditions. Independent school communities are fluid, dynamic, and responsive. They transform their mission into evolving, energetic ways of life. The mission and the ethos of these schools are evident in the interactions among their members, in the curriculum, and in the physical environment.

The mission articulates the goals of the institution. Combined with the school’s core values, its history and traditions, its guiding principles each school has a clear, distinct identity and approach. Faculty, staff, parents and students purposely select a school for its compatibility with their personal missions and goals. For example, teachers at independent schools can select religious or secular, single sex or co-educational, boarding or day schools--options unavailable in the public sector. Members of the community develop a sense of ownership.
and investment through their commitment to the mission and their involvement with each other, ultimately creating a sense of personal affiliation.

An independent school is an animated community, encouraging its various members to participate actively in the process of creating a special place. Constantly responding to the needs of its members as well as to innovations in curriculum, pedagogy, and technology, each community invites changes that enrich the learning environment. The dynamic atmosphere, in turn, promotes the personal and professional growth of teachers even as it inspires the students’ engagement in their own education.

The nature of the intentional community provides a host of benefits. Teachers can rely on a set of understandings and assumptions that is shared by colleagues, parents, and students, as well as by administrators and trustees. The common values provide a framework for the school’s overall operation and help to resolve conflicts and to solve problems. The interdependence of the community’s members creates the expectation of partnership. The more congruent the understanding of the constituents, the stronger will be the sense of common purpose and shared responsibility. Reflecting this principle, when hiring faculty and staff, accepting families, and electing trustees, schools often hold conversations to clarify the assumptions that underlie the mission. On-going discussions, such as annual "state of the school" meetings, offer opportunities to exchange ideas, to listen to other points of view, and to find common ground. One school has used these meetings to help identify key issues and then begin an inclusive process to address them. In this case, policy statements on diversity and meeting student needs were developed as a result of the open forum.

These conversations add to the supportive nature of independent school environments. Mentoring programs offer support to teachers new to the profession or new to the school. When Meredith first began teaching, her mentor met regularly with her, helping her to understand the school’s culture: difficult acronyms, celebrations and festivals, the dress, and reimbursement policies. Her mentor was also available to discuss classroom issues including discipline and homework policies. Collectively, mentoring programs bring together teachers new in a given year to share experiences and to build relationships.

Often these relationships develop into more formal collaborative efforts. When Bill started teaching in an independent school, he found himself working as part of a grade-level team and enjoyed the daily support of colleagues, while working on curriculum, discussing a particular student’s needs, or considering a parent’s concern. Meanwhile, in the Upper School, Candace, an English teacher, began team teaching an American Studies course with her colleague Doug from the history department. Such collaboration can engender opportunities for curricular innovation.

The closeness of the community allows for personal and professional support. It is not uncommon, for example, for a school to respond with compassion to a teacher’s medical or family needs, extending its resources beyond what is strictly required. Teachers rally to cover the classes of a colleague whose child becomes ill. In one case, accommodations were made for a teacher diagnosed with cancer to be able to maintain a close connection to her students.
while she also received treatment. Martha, who teaches sculpture, found the students more than willing to move and mix the clay, now too heavy for her to lift. She received a hand-woven scarf—a gift of caring and support created by the entire community.

In these intentional communities, the inter-dependent relationships of teachers, parents, and students create a shared sense of responsibility for the students’ success. Teachers, parents, and students often collaborate to help the student with such issues as time management and social relationships. At one school, the half-hour before the day begins is consistently scheduled for individual meetings where students, teachers, parents, and advisors assess a particular student’s progress. At another school, Henry had regular monthly meetings with parents in order to discuss how a concept or skill would be taught, so that the parents could reinforce at home the terminology and the methods of the class.

This collaborative approach leads to mutual investment in the success of students and teachers, as well as that of the school itself. With so much at stake, constituents are free to give of themselves and their time, transforming contracts into covenants. The commitment to excellence is self-reinforcing.

Independent school teachers, as vital parts of energetic communities, are respected and valued for their individual contributions. Teachers are often recognized through monetary awards and recognition. Impossible to quantify, though, are the heartfelt notes that students and parents write and the visits from former students who still see their teachers as important influences on their lives. One former student proudly stopped by to tell Kelly about a service project he was involved in, feeling that she would like to know about his accomplishments and perhaps that some of her current students would like to participate as well.

Teachers in independent schools enjoy considerable support for professional development. For example, a school adopted a professional evaluation process that encouraged faculty to set objectives for meaningful growth, and the teachers then received funds to attend workshops, courses, or conferences. Other institutions offer financial support for the pursuit of advanced degrees.

Overall, the character of the independent school as an intentional community provides it with great strength. Its members have opportunities for personal and professional growth, for developing their creativity, and for sustaining close relationships within the community. In these nurturing and stimulating environments, teachers find opportunities to integrate their personal values and aspirations into their daily work.

POWER

Power for teachers in independent schools is encouraged in the daily practice of classroom teaching. Teachers have freedom and flexibility to create and implement curricula. They are also empowered to influence many aspects of school life and to contribute to the development of school policies and practices.
Many institutions value discussion, debate and persuasion as tools for decision making. For example, one school recently changed its mascot from a Mohawk Indian to a hawk through dialogues that involved all constituents of the school community.

One source of faculty power in independent schools is the small size. A teacher in an independent school can usually expect to be responsible for a manageable number of students in small groups. This advantage gives the teacher the power to know students as individuals, to give them individual attention, and thereby to be more effective educators.

Independent schools enjoy a rich tradition of local control of both policy and practice. This means it is easier for teachers to implement their ideas. At an independent school in Toledo a new course was designed and put into the curriculum very quickly. A history teacher and an English teacher used their interests in women's studies to design a one semester cross-disciplinary course for juniors and seniors. With few bureaucratic constraints, the course was designed, approved and implemented in a matter of weeks.

Generally, independent schools give their teachers a great deal of autonomy. Schools look for teachers who possess high intellect and content-area knowledge, who are creative and passionate about teaching and learning, who have strong communication skills, and who are productive and energetic with strong work ethics. Independent schools hire teachers who value their relationships with students, colleagues and families. Because teachers possess these qualities, schools give them much freedom and flexibility--and therefore power. Sometimes teachers new to independent schools don’t realize this. For example, one teacher who came from teaching in a public school to teaching in an independent school discovered a math text in his first-grade classroom closet. He assumed that this was the required text and began the year teaching from it. At one point he asked his grade-level colleagues why this text was selected and discovered that it had been abandoned years before; he was expected to create his own curriculum. After he designed and began to teach his own units, an impressed parent introduced him to a university professor who invited the teacher to work on a new math curriculum. During the next three years the teacher collaborated with other teachers and the university to publish an innovative math text that was used across the country.

In independent schools, teachers often choose their own texts, develop units of study, design experiences and means of assessment. They are also free to make use of both community and parental resources. One Dayton area teacher took advantage of a thriving general aviation community; some high school students completed ground school, took a series of flight lessons and experienced aerobatic flight, all as part of an effort to explore the relationship between freedom and limitation. This experiment was eventually adopted as a regular curricular piece for all 9th graders.

Teachers in independent schools not only have power within their classrooms but also have a voice in the larger school community. At a school in Cleveland, each team of teachers decides if they want to give standardized tests to their students. They also decide which test will be given. In many independent schools faculty influence decisions about decorum, ceremonies, awards, dress codes, and architecture of new buildings.
Teacher power leads to student power. When teachers invest in, create, and own their curricula, students tend to be similarly invested. Autonomous teachers model for their students free and responsible behavior and accountability. They also encourage students to voice their opinions, to stand up for what they believe, to monitor their own behavior, and to practice self-discipline— in short, to have power over themselves.

PRESENCE

"You should always read the newspaper before you go to bed," implored Miss Hearn who taught social studies for decades at the same school. She is still a presence in the community where she taught. One of her former students, now a teacher with years of teaching experience herself, wrote to Miss Hearn thanking her for the positive impact she had on her life. Miss Hearn, of course, wrote back. That was her nature.

The nature of private schools enables and even rewards self-expression. All of us know a colleague famous for his idiosyncratic dress or style. Perhaps you will work with a Myron Walmsley, a teacher of math who distinguished himself with brilliance in the subject but innocence in dress. He was either unaware of coordinating his wardrobe or unconcerned with impressing his audience. But he won the hearts of his students. They honor him with an annual event: Myron Walmsley Day. Required dress: loud tie, trousers that clash with a brightly patterned sport coat. The school's yearbook includes a photo of the inaugural event. Students vie to be included in the photograph.

Being known is a reciprocal relationship in the private school environment. The small student to teacher ratio guarantees that no one can hide or fall between the cracks. Teachers are encouraged to know birthdays, fears, strengths, and blemishes. People willing to let others get to know them will find the private school to be an inviting place.

Children know they can find a teacher who will listen to the story of the dog they had to put down, or their crushes. Or the heavy stuff: their parent's dissolving marriage, or their experimentation with drugs. These conversations couldn't happen without trust, a virtue nearly universal in the mottoes or mission statements of private schools. Students aren't afraid to challenge a teacher's opinion, and teachers will hand back a paper when it doesn't reflect a child's best work. School traditions reinforce foundations of permanence and trust.

Classrooms are safe places to practiced forgiveness. Teachers aren't ashamed to admit their mistakes. Some lessons miss the mark. Students recognize the modeling. They ask for a second chance and they get it. Presence requires occasional absence. Teachers in a private school need a life outside the school to bring their best into the classroom. Desire, not obligation, is the independent school teacher's motivation for staying after school for the orchestra performance or the basketball playoffs. The benefit of this extracurricular involvement is that it strengthens the relationships between the individuals in the school community.
Some schools don't describe their grouping as a community at all; at the risk of cliche, they refer to it as a family. Some families have made generational investments in their private school. It's the school that grandmother attended. Now the grandson goes there. For other families, it is a first generation experience. Each family, old or new, enriches the overall landscape of the school. Every person’s presence makes a difference in a private school. Perhaps the teacher has the greatest opportunity to make a difference. Presence is being there with all you’ve got. It’s your imprint, your personality, your identity.

CONCLUSION

We recall Mr. Chips, that crusty caricature of the independent school teacher. His modern counterpart has a very different voice and face. What remains true is that teaching in the particular and occasionally peculiar culture of an independent school offers the chance to touch students’ lives deeply, personally, and indelibly. Whether this is a benefit unique to private schools is a moot point. It is the ultimate benefit that draws those of us who teach both as challenge and legacy.

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