What Dead Schools Can Teach Us

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It was Saturday afternoon, June 19, 1926, and a crowd of independent school parents and well-wishers had gathered for the graduation ceremony. At first glance, the cover of the printed program for the exercises appeared both dignified and unremarkable: a photo of the school — housed in its handsome Queen Anne home, with orderly, uniformed children playing cooperatively on the front lawn — above the customary Gothic typeface that announced “Commencement and Program.” A closer look, however, revealed an unexpected plot twist on this graduation day. The cover text delivered lamentable news:

> Commencement and Program on the occasion of the closing, indefinitely of The Misses Janes’ School Hollywood High School Memorial Auditorium

Inside the program, founder and principal Carrie Belle Janes offered a full-page recounting of the school's impressive growth, in its brief 15-year life span, from the original 13 children to more than 100. She concluded with the painful reflection, "Our work has been most sincere and it is with intense regret that we cannot continue for the present, with the training of the children that we love so much."

The Misses Janes' School scenario may prompt us to ask how frequently such closures have occurred, especially as we witness the blows that the recent recession has meted out to today's independent schools. The edition of Porter Sargent's *A Handbook of Private Schools for American Boys and Girls* that was published in 1927 just after the last breath of the Misses Janes' School provides useful perspective. A number of the friendly competitors listed in Porter Sargent's book — schools that shared the independent school landscape in Los Angeles with Carrie Belle Janes' institution — are still flourishing: places like Berkeley Hall School, Marlborough School, Marymount-in-the-West, Harvard School, and Westlake School for Girls (the latter two now in merged form).

More striking, however, are the significant numbers of schools that have perished. They include Miss Allen's Private School (for "nervous and backward children"), California Preparatory School for Boys ("Undenominational, but Under Christian Influences"), Cumnock School (emphasizing that "education is ever a question of self-expression"), Los Angeles Coaching School ("Intensive preparation is given in small groups or individually in this tutoring school"), School of Little Green Trees (for the "supernormal child"), and Urban Military Academy (which had recently moved to upscale Hancock Park and "elaborated its equipment").

Cultural historians may legitimately wonder if the "test case" of independent schools in Los Angeles, which some observers argue has Hollywood as its cultural center, provides misleading data when attempting to understand longevity patterns among the national pool of such schools. How could you expect any respectable institutions to survive, one might argue, in a milieu so heavily characterized by the ephemeral? However, a review of Porter Sargent's 1927 listings for (older and then more cultured) San Francisco and the extended Bay Area reveals a similar pattern. Still present are familiar names such as Drew School, Presidio Hill School, and The Hamlin School, but who today remembers institutions like Bates ("known … as the oldest private school in San Francisco") or Potter ("enrolls boys from the leading families of the city") or — just across the Bay — Watson ("for the children of Christian Scientists") or the Williams Institute ("for growing the group consciousness in the child and teaching him the art of group thinking")?

When roll is taken today, moving region by region through the listings of schools in California found in Porter Sargent's 1927 *Handbook*, there is an alarming and astonishing consistency to the pattern that emerges. Deceased schools clearly outnumber the living. Typically, only one in three of the institutions listed in 1927 is with us today. Eighty-five years of powerful social and economic forces have dramatically reshaped the independent school ecosystem.

Is this institutional "die-off" a distinctively California phenomenon? Hardly. Examining a sampling of independent school longevity data in other parts of the country yields strikingly similar storylines. For

example, Porter Sargent's listings identify 33 schools that existed in Virginia in 1916. Today, 11 of those schools remain open. In Oregon and Washington, the composite list of schools that had been founded by 1926 — drawn from various early editions of the *Handbook* — also includes 33 schools, 11 of which survive today. A similar list for Texas reveals 33 schools, only nine of which are currently in operation. In the nation's capital, the list includes 34 schools in existence in the first quarter of the 20th century. Only 11 now remain. In Chicago, only five of 20 schools listed in the 1925 *Handbook* survive in 2012. In Arizona, where conditions were unusually inhospitable to independent schools, of the 26 schools that Porter Sargent identified as existing before 1941, a mere two survive today. Additional research will determine the extent to which these patterns persist in other pockets of the country, but it is clear that, as an independent school peers into the future, little is guaranteed.

The big question is: Why do so many independent schools fail? And what, finally, are the chief causes of death? When they can be performed, institutional "autopsies" are illuminating, but it should be noted that many schools disappear with few clues about their final undoing. While the school run by Carrie Belle Janes and her sisters was popular in its heyday (enrolling the children of Charlie Chaplin and Cecil B. DeMille, among others), little is found in the historical record about the reasons that the Janes sisters ceased their operations in 1926.

However, when schools do leave paper trails that help us understand the reasons for their demise, four powerful contributing factors recur time and again.

Mission Fatigue

The first of these factors is that the school's mission loses its potency and timeliness. Most often this occurs because societal values or economic conditions have shifted significantly. In the midst of such shifts, a school can fail to understand and compellingly articulate why its mission can still matter to prospective parents and students (as well as to prospective benefactors). It is incapable of rejuvenating and transforming its traditionally held mission, and it is unable to reinterpret its mission and explain how it meets the changed needs of students in modern times. This impotence on a school's part is not difficult to understand. Missions are, at heart, a school's purpose and core values, and significantly altering them can be akin to asking the guardians of a school culture to turn their backs on the very ideals they have cherished above all for decades.

A couple of examples will help to illustrate how mission issues can place schools at risk. Relative to today's mix of coeducational and single-sex schools, the institutions of the early 20th century were predominantly all boys and all girls. Institutions that served girls exclusively often viewed themselves as oases for the privileged, akin to residential clubs where young girls received their final preparations for lives as efficient mothers and socially presentable wives. Such schools were seldom bashful about calling out these features as appealing aspects of the educational settings. In the 1926 edition of the *Handbook*, Ward-Belmont School in Nashville, Tennessee, described itself as a place where "young women from the best homes of the South, East and West meet in profitable association to enjoy the advantages of the institution's national prestige and patronage." Miss Sayward's, on Philadelphia's Main Line, explained what happened when girls got down to work in such institutions: "Training in the Social Graces and Development of a high type of Cultured

Womanhood are the outstanding characteristics of the school."

Both of these schools disappeared as America's expectations about schooling for girls evolved in the second half of the last century. Many of their peer institutions did as well, engulfed by societal change fomented by the Women's Rights movement, to which they were poorly equipped to respond. A number of girls' schools survived, however, as they astutely read the cultural handwriting on the wall. Some went coed or merged with nearby boys' schools, while others reinterpreted the concept of a girls' school, and made a persuasive case for why their schools were more timely than ever and best positioned to prepare young women to meet the challenges they would inevitably face in a changing world.

Another genre of independent schools that faced mission challenges — even crises — in the 20th century was the military academy. Military academies used a military system of education to address what was often referred to in popular magazines as "The Boy Problem." It was not uncommon for these schools to promise parents that they would bring self-control, physical health, and regular discipline to the lives of boys, including those who were either borderline incorrigibles or physical weaklings. To guide institutional direction, many military schools boasted, as did Shattuck School in Faribault, Minnesota, in the 1927 *Handbook*, that they had a "military department under direction of a Commandant detailed by the Secretary of War." Many leading institutions of this sort were, in essence, accredited by the War Department (as the U.S. Department of Defense was then known). St. John's Military Academy, Wisconsin, noted with pride in its 1927 Porter Sargent advertisement that "The United States Government makes an annual inspection of the school, and for the past ten years it has been annually rated as an 'Honor School.'"

What were the chief values that these schools were inculcating in their students? An essay published by a student at Harvard School in Los Angeles (when it was a military school in the early 1900s) gives us a glimpse of the values instilled:

After a couple of years of such training, the cadet will obey his superiors without asking questions. And he is the kind of man who is going to succeed in the world. Before a man can command other men, he must learn to obey without murmuring…. And that is the first principle of military training — "obey your superiors without asking questions." If a young man gets only that out of his military training, he has been more than recompensed.[1]

For several decades in America, values of this sort struck a positive chord with a number of parents who valued obedience to authority (especially since they ostensibly held the authority in their families) but who were often stumped about how to get their boys to be more compliant. In that milieu, military schools thrived. However, as the 1960s and 1970s ushered in a period of intense national turmoil, during which many questioned America's involvement in Vietnam, the cultural tide turned on military academies. More and more people viewed blind obedience to authority as an evil, rather than a virtue, and these schools faced an important fork in the road. Some, like Shattuck, dropped the military regimen, went coed, and redefined themselves primarily as college preparatory schools. A limited number, like St. John's, clarified the importance of a military-style environment in helping each student achieve his unique personal potential. But many others perished, unwilling to

let go of a way of life that had animated their institutions for decades. California was home at one time to some 40 to 50 precollegiate military schools. Today, of the 207 member schools in California Association of Independent Schools, only one is a military academy.

The Leadership Transition

Beyond mission fatigue, another contributing cause of death among independent schools is unsuccessful leadership transitions, specifically from one headship to the next. Many independent schools were founded as proprietary institutions by visionary leaders. These schools were, in a real sense, the embodiment of the leaders' personal beliefs about education, and these dominant figures breathed life into their campus communities through sheer human presence. The very names of many independent schools are reminders of the great extent to which they reflected the founders themselves: Sidwell Friends School (Thomas Sidwell), The Chapin School (Maria Bowen Chapin), Fenster School (George and Kitty Fenster), Thayer Academy (Sylvanus Thayer), Catlin Gabel School (Ruth Catlin), Isidore Newman School (Isidore Newman), The Lovett School (Eva Edwards Lovett), The Thacher School (Sherman Day Thacher).

When founders like these and dozens of others passed the baton to the next generation of school leaders, opportunities were abundant for awkward hand-offs. Many left their schools to sons and daughters, but members of the next generation often illustrated the reality that the charisma, entrepreneurship, business acumen, and educational leadership possessed by their parents were not hereditary. Others who were bequeathed schools viewed them strictly as businesses and sold them to the highest bidder, many of whom lacked the capacities needed to achieve long-term financial sustainability. Still other schools morphed into nonprofits, but they typically struggled to find their bearings.

A somewhat typical case can serve to illuminate the depth of the impact when leadership transitions go awry. At the peak of his career in 1885, William T. Reid founded Belmont School, just south of San Francisco, after having served as the first superintendent of schools in Brookline, Massachusetts, and the president of the University of California. Because many people viewed Belmont as a leading light among West Coast independent schools — with its graduates typically heading off to Stanford, UC Berkeley, and the Ivies in great numbers — the school's families no doubt felt they had found a stable institution for their boys. It was startling, therefore, for the students to arrive at school in September 1918 and read a brief letter from Dr. Reid, published in the student magazine, noting that he was "giving up the ownership and headmastership of Belmont School," adding in terse but pained (and mysterious) prose that "No one can know what this step is costing me." Beyond the shock that he would no longer be at the helm was the realization that the new owner of the formerly nonsectarian school was the Catholic Bishop of San Francisco. Despite the Archdiocese's efforts, the school never regained its luster. Struggling with enrollment, it closed its doors some years later.

Money Trouble

In addition to mission and leadership transition challenges, financial collapse — not surprisingly —

can be a leading cause of death in independent schools. This can occur when any of four factors prevail (or when two or more coalesce): The school burns through its reserves (or has never established a reserve fund in the first place), it becomes overwhelmed by deferred maintenance, it experiences precipitous and sustained enrollment declines, or it borrows money for land or facilities in amounts that turn out to exceed the school's eventual capacity to pay back its loans in a timely way. Economic trends from the broader society often buffet schools heavily and conspire to make these factors extremely potent. At the height of the Great Depression, Porter Sargent's 1938 *Handbook* noted that 45 schools had been shuttered in the prior year alone.

Sadly, examples of schools going out of business due to financial misfortunes are plentiful. Among Porter Sargent's 1927 listings for California is Montezuma Mountain School, a Progressive-era school on a stunning 300-acre campus in the Santa Cruz Mountains, with most buildings designed in an Aztec motif. A premier school for many years, it experienced an enrollment decline after World War II, which created severe financial stressors. When a fire subsequently burned one of the main campus structures, the lack of adequate insurance made it impossible to rebuild, and the school closed its doors forever. A similar fate awaited another school listed in the 1927 *Handbook* — Girls' Collegiate School. Founded in Los Angeles in 1892, it boasted of "teachers carefully chosen for their personality as well as their Scholarly attainments," reflecting the school's early orientation to college preparation. The school ultimately moved twice, parlaying urban real estate equity into cash for bucolic campuses that were some 35 miles distant from the initial location. But by 1970, the enrollment had dwindled to a mere 46 students in the school's six grades, and it closed shortly thereafter.

Unfortunately, the story of independent schools running out of cash remains a constant thread in more recent history. St. Leonard's Academy in Philadelphia closed in the 1980s, many decades after its founding — and while fully enrolled — when the buildings were declared unsafe for use as a school. This followed years of unsuccessful attempts on the school's part to persuade potential benefactors to rehabilitate the campus. And within the last year, Windrush School, a 35-year-old institution in the San Francisco Bay Area, experienced a "perfect storm" of financial tribulations. Several years earlier, the board decided to build a new facility to accommodate a planned expansion of the middle school. It was anticipating that increased enrollment would offset the significant bond payments the school would incur. Once construction was completed, however, the recession began and enrollment plummeted, leaving the school incapable of meeting its financial obligations. The school ceased operations in June 2012.

Planning Problems

The fourth factor that can contribute to the demise of independent schools is the lack of strategic planning. What is striking in examining the surviving written record of deceased independent schools is the paucity of evidence that school leaders ever regularly engaged in long-term planning. Most seem to have been engulfed in the demands of the day, with minimal appetites for assessing the future and their institutions' potential fates as that future unfolded. This orientation — which favors short-term, small-picture thinking — heightened the likelihood that more schools would perish. Schools that don't astutely anticipate and plan for the impacts of demographic shifts,

disruptive wars, economic downturns, cultural sea changes, and technological revolutions are more likely to be sabotaged by them than to benefit from them.

Porter Sargent increasingly recognized the importance and potency of societal and economic change as factors that inevitably shape independent schools. By 1937, his *Handbook* included some 200 pages of descriptive material that outlined trends and forces affecting K–12 and higher education. His 1934 edition even noted the then-recent tendency of independent schools to operate in denial with respect to the looming realities of the Great Depression. “Not until the fall of 1932,” he observed, “were the private schools affected by the depression. For two years they thought themselves depression proof.” He went on to report that as a direct result of the nation’s financial cataclysm, “Price cutting among the private schools has finally become an obsolete term…. Fees paid by students in boarding schools this year are, one may safely say, thirty percent below last year….” As might be expected, institutional carnage in this environment was extensive. Sargent described the impact on independent schools rather bluntly: “Never before have they had so little money to spend. Salaries have been rigidly cut, expenses pared down. Many a good school has been obliged to close its doors, in some cases permanently.”

What, finally, can we learn from dead schools? There appears to be four chief causes of independent school demise: missions that lose potency and timeliness, unsuccessful leadership transitions, financial collapse, and lack of strategic planning. These four areas — mission, head, money, and planning — are, in essence, the prime responsibilities of the board of trustees. If a school is going to survive and flourish, therefore, it is imperative that it build and sustain strength in its board of trustees. That group needs to understand that to operate an independent school is to participate in a high-mortality enterprise. And it needs to fully appreciate the fact that its performance, quite literally, makes the difference between the life and death of a school. The failure to grasp these realities can put any independent school at risk and dramatically increase the chances of landing in the independent school cemetery, while becoming yet another institution whose ultimate legacy is to provide a sad and cautionary tale for the larger independent school community.

Note

1. Cadet Capt. O. Rey Rule, “Value of Military Training to Young Men,” *The Inter-Collegian*, Inter-Collegian Publishing Company, Boston, 1903.

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