

## The 20-Year Headship

BY RALPH DAVISON

“I’d rather pump gas than do that again!” I’ll never forget those words. One of my classmates from the New Heads Institute came to our first reunion at the NAIS Annual Meeting in New York some years back to tell us that he was looking for a new job — any job, just as long as it wasn’t heading a school.

It turns out that he hadn’t lasted a full year as a head of school. And, yet, just a few months previously on the beautiful campus of Wellesley College, he had been full of bravado and hope, expecting that this new chapter of his life would be the best yet.

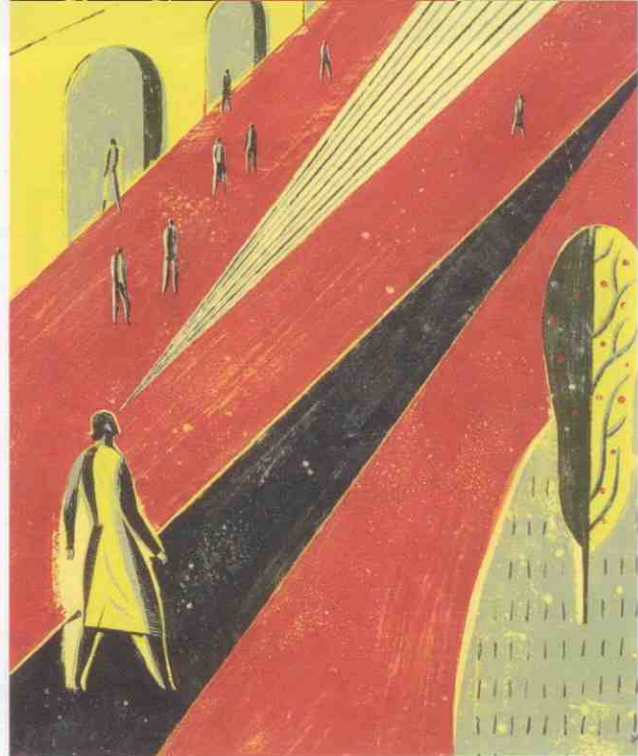
Our class at the New Heads Institute was 60 strong, and we had bonded. None of us had been heads before, and we were beginning a new adventure of leadership in schools all over the U.S. and abroad. We vowed to stay in touch and always to have a reunion at the NAIS Annual Conference. No matter what happened, we were the Class of ’86, and nothing could stop us!

Nothing except the usual list of suspects: a poorly run board of trustees, or a powerful and recalcitrant faculty, or a group of parents who seemed to know more about running a head out of town than they did about parenting.

As each year passed, we gathered together to share successes, dreams for the future, and war stories. And, each year, one or more of our ranks bit the dust. Some went on to head other schools, while others decided that this profession wasn’t for them.

There didn’t seem to be any neutral or boring tales told at these gatherings. After a few drinks, and time to rekindle friendships forged solid with this powerful common experience called headship, the tales were always passionate. We came to expect a few horror stories, some kept secret for months because there was no other place or group to tell them to. But there were also tales of joy, accomplishment, and gratitude for having the opportunity to positively affect the lives of so many students, teachers, staff, and parents. Indeed, to affect the world.

Now in the 2006–2007 school year — the 21st since we came together that summer on the campus of Wellesley — most of our class no longer head a school. But some do, and a few even still head the schools where they began their careers in July of 1986.



BRAD YEOTH/THESPOT.COM

So, what makes the difference between a person who flounders in this profession and one who stays strong, effective, and even beloved for 20 years?

I’d be less than honest if I didn’t say that there is some luck involved — being in the right place at the right time, or being fortunate enough to have allies come out of the woodwork when the going gets tough, as it always will. We can’t control all the variables nor effectively juggle all the balls (the problems, the challenges, the requests, the needs, etc.) that are often thrown at us at once. Nobody is that good.

But there still are some skills and traits that lend themselves to a successful 20-year headship. Here are a few:

- *The ability to communicate clearly and kindly with multiple constituencies* — especially the board of trustees.
- *The ability to reinvent oneself.* Very few of us brought all the skills and interests we needed to our first headship. While our boards were looking for leadership in fund-raising and finance, most of us were darned good teachers when we took over the helms of our schools. Fortunately, we also were darned good learners, and through trial and error became skilled fund-raisers and financiers. We also became good strategic planners and board trainers and counselors and investors. We learned to anticipate the needs of our school, to get the skills necessary to meet those needs, and to begin to steer the school toward goals that satisfied those needs, often before anyone else realized the importance of those needs.
- *The ability to rally the troops.* Some say that leaders have to have followers. I prefer to think that leaders can somehow inspire large groups of people to row in the



same direction. It usually is not the direction that the leader chooses on his or her own, but it is the direction that all end up agreeing is needed for the school. And that agreement doesn't happen automatically.

- *The ability to see over the edge.* This is both the fun part and the dangerous part. Schools and the people who comprise them inevitably must change. To guide the change strategically, by seeing what lies ahead before others do, is both a privilege and a dangerous move. To be on the cutting edge of anything invites criticism from all constituents. But to be way behind the curve in anything invites irrelevance. So, the challenge is to figure out where the curve is, to determine how to be at least near the curve, and then to successfully invite others to join you there. Expect early skirmishes and, eventually, some well-deserved kudos.

- *The ability to understand that people*

*resist change.* Most new heads want to know how to effect change in their schools. It isn't easy. People generally hate change. But the reality is that schools do change, and change again — with cultural changes and with the growing understanding of child development. The trick is to manage that change productively. For 39 years, I have had a six-inch ruler on my desk that says: "Think small; big ideas upset everybody!" It's true. And the sooner a head of school understands this dynamic, the more effective he or she can be.

- *The understanding that curve balls are a part of the game.* We make a mistake if we think that the normal state of affairs at a school is a day without a surprise. That kind of day is the exception. A normal day usually brings a surprise that demands an inordinately large amount of your time and energy. Curve balls come from the most unexpected places, but again — that is the norm. Once you come to realize that — and to enjoy the complexity of it all

— you will enjoy a greater sense of inner peace in the midst of dealing with these new challenges.

- *The ability to pick one's battles.* A key question for any leader: "Is this the hill I am willing to die on?" Often the answer is "no." Some battles just aren't worth waging, and compromise and diplomacy are the ways to a just and mutually satisfying peace. But from time to time there are issues that arise where a head of school must be willing to put everything on the line — including his or her job. Usually they involve a major ethical issue. You can't do that too often, and you must be wise in deciding when to do it. But if you don't stand for something, you stand for nothing.

- *The ability to live one's private life in public.* Is it lonely at the top? I never experienced a lonely day in my life as a head of school. But I understood that my life was public domain. What I wore, how I combed my hair, my every word and action, and even things

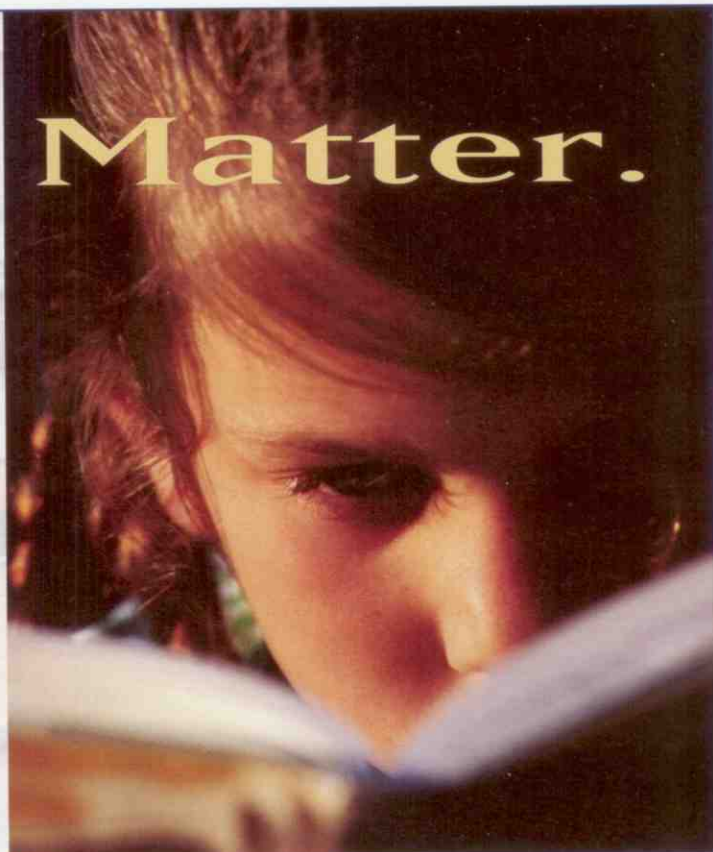
# Grades Matter.

As a school visionary and leader, you constantly strive for excellence. You expect the best from your staff, students, and board. Why settle for less from your insurance company?

Markel makes the grade. If you hit the "insurance books," you'll find that independent insurance analyst A.M. Best Company rates us A (Excellent) for our financial strength. Our insurance program gets top marks, too. We offer important protection for your school, including educators' liability, teachers' professional liability, and sexual abuse and molestation.



[www.privateschoolinsurance.com](http://www.privateschoolinsurance.com)  
800-943-3567





I never said or did were the subject of general discussion. And this is a family affair. My wife and children, even though they were not on the payroll, enjoyed nearly the same status. I understood the rules of the game and enjoyed the game, most of the time. When my father died, the board used a private jet to come to his funeral and support me. When my grandchildren were born, it was a school community event. Sometimes this is a hard dynamic, but I embraced it.

- *The ability to care for hundreds — perhaps even thousands — of people at once.* One of the most challenging, and yet most satisfying, roles of a school head is his or her pastoral role. Even in a large school, he or she finds ways to counsel, advise, and comfort students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of the school. My son — now an educator himself — once wrote that, when he was a student, his dad didn't treat him like all the other children; but rather his dad treated all the students as if they were his children.

It is important to note that the board of trustees plays a critical role in determining the longevity of its sole employee, the head of school. A head can have all of the above skills and traits, but he or she cannot lead the school alone. The board must function effectively as a group.

Among the skills and traits of a board that nurtures a 20-year head are:

- *Being mission-centered.* The board understands the mission of the school and the importance of making all decisions and basing all actions according to that mission.
- *Understanding that, while the board may be composed of individual stars, they shine brightest when they see themselves as a constellation* (to borrow a wonderful image from Harvard professor Dick Chait).
- *Being dedicated to learning how to be both good trustees and a good board.* This is not the day job for most trustees, and most are not born knowing how to do

the job well. They have to study how to do it well, and that study continues as long as they are trustees.

- *Being dedicated to an orderly and strategic succession plan for trustee turnover* that helps the mission, values, and culture of the school to endure.

- *Viewing the relationship between the board and the head almost like a marriage*, with a deep commitment to making that marriage work. Each partner has an enduring respect and affection for the other, and functions in a way that uplifts the other. Each recognizes and respects the individual strengths and challenges of the other and seeks to find ways to nurture the strengths and to help with the challenges of the other. Each enjoys the other.

- *Being dedicated to the support of the school's head both professionally and personally.* If the head and the board are in sync, the head should never have to worry about the board's support when the going gets tough. At the same time, the board should never have to worry that it will be blindsided by an issue — the head will anticipate it and help the board to play its role well in dealing with it. On a personal level, the board will anticipate the head's needs. Is he or she putting children through college? Is he or she anticipating retirement in a few years? The board will find ways to help the head meet these personal challenges in order to ensure the head's long tenure at the school.

When I talk with my friends and colleagues who have headed their schools for 20 or more years, most find words to describe themselves and their boards in the above ways. Surely this isn't an exhaustive list. But it does give some insight into a few of the factors that contribute to a long, productive, and satisfying tenure both for the head and the school.

*Ralph Davison was the head of Greensboro Day School (North Carolina) from 1986 to 2006. He currently serves as senior consultant for Carney, Sandoe and Associates.*

"Education's purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one."

—Malcom Forbes



**TOWER SCHOOL,**  
Marblehead, Massachusetts

**WILLOW HILL SCHOOL,**  
Sudbury, Massachusetts

**FRIENDS ACADEMY,**  
North Dartmouth, Massachusetts



**PETERMAN**  
ARCHITECTS, INC.

10 CONCORD CROSSING  
CONCORD, MA 01742  
978.341.0900  
www.petermanarchitects.com