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independent school education

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## Why independent schools?

In the interest of full disclosure, as author, my perspective has been shaped by 35 consecutive years working with independent school educators or for independent schools. Raised as the son of two NYS public school educators, I took a summer job just south of Binghamton, NY that was run by independent school teachers from Episcopal Academy, Groton School, Princeton University, Penn Charter School and Kent School, among others. It was by the representatives' of these institutions that my career was guided as I was coaching and dorm parenting from the age of 17 without the knowledge I was interviewing for my first job — in Independent Schools.



So the argument of “Why Independent Schools?” is one that I have public school perspective from birth to age 17, living with two teaching parents and attending all public schools through high school, followed by the period of my life that covers ages 18-53 when I was either attending or teaching in independent educational programs. I have written several articles for this publication and a multitude over my career covering disparate topics from coaching to gaining institutional trust.

Independent education is the answer because public education today is not. Public education is hampered by its size and inflexibility. Public education lacks accountability to the children. Look at the rash of bullying in our less connected environments where too many teachers are allowed to see their jobs as merely conveying their subject matter to their students.

Independent Schools:

- They're independently governed by a board of trustees, as opposed to a public school board.
- They must be fully accredited by an accrediting agency with high standards.
- They may be coeducational or single-sex.
- They may be day schools or boarding schools.
- They are supported by a combination of tuition payments, charitable contributions, and endowment revenue — not public funds. (NAIS website)

### Diversity of Mission



It is a long-standing tradition that independent schools have existed in many forms, covering the span of age groups and curricular or pedagogical philosophies. Junior boarding (grade six-nine predominantly) and day schools (K-eight), in which I have served in for the past 31 years, are a strong example of how an age group can be best served with a mission that directly targets an age group. The comprehensive, 24/7 shared experience for faculty and students, makes our teachers middle school experts: developmentally and pedagogically.

## Communities of Learners

Comprehensive advising and role modeling are lacking in public education because systems rarely exist that are “real” to students, and effective. Whose job is it in a public school to be the guardian or point person for a particular student? The principal? What is the size of her flock? Does a homeroom take the place of an advisor? If advisors exist in public, are they there for their advisees after four p.m. if needed? How many advisees might they have? Are they actively connected with their advisee’s parents, in good times and in bad?

In independent schools, most students have that one “go to” person who is their advisor — advisors can shepherd one to eight students traditionally. Most advisories meet at least weekly and become more connected than the normal teacher/student relationship. They become an advocate, a confidant, and a parent coach or a parent’s set of eyes at school. They break bread together with their advisees occasionally — like families do, strengthening fabric and facilitating communication in a safe environment. They are a manifestation of the business structure of independent schools. They are part of the insurance package that each independent school provides for each family that joins its community.

On a larger level, independent schools emphasize the development of community and understand their role in educating children. Across the valley from our Linden Hill School sits one campus (of two) of the largest independent schools in the country, Northfield Mount Hermon (NMH). Three years ago, the school closed one of its campuses and downsized to strengthen the identity of its students, its alumni, and to better articulate to the market, who is a good candidate for NMH. The business model of independent schools helped the leaders of this fine institution make the student-centered decision to get smaller and be more connected.

## Accountability of Faculty



Independent school teachers, especially in junior boarding schools, develop the connections with their students by engaging in conversations with the children over daily living skills, eating right, and yes, even sexuality. These conversations build relationships and most importantly, TRUST. Our children begin to understand that the steady coaching comes because someone is making the effort, because they care about the child. At Linden Hill, I let families looking at our school know that I have hired faculty with “hearts and smarts” and we continue to care for them and develop them while they are with us, being central to the success of each student with whom they interact.

We hire in a very discriminating way to find LD trained, heart-felt, intelligent educators who see our work as a vocation, a calling.

It sounds corny, but because we only have 18 full time faculty members (most of whom I have hired), I can better articulate the strengths and weaknesses of this team. Size matters when attempting to control a human environment that has complex components. Note the innate ownership in my tone derived from the business responsibility that I have as an accountable head of a school.

Each year faculty serve at the pleasure of the Head of School and many have no more than a 30 day, at-will, state protection of their employment. During the most recent economic downturn, many independent schools have done away with the word “contract” on faculty employment agreements so as to be able to more effectively lay off faculty in the event of lower enrollment. How does this stack up against tenure for faculty accountability?

I have spent a great deal of my professional development over the past decade interacting with scientists studying the brain with respect to literacy and learning in general. Though we have a multitude of unanswered questions in this area, researchers agree that learners are diverse in their needs and that the brain can be affected positively by environmental stimuli introduced by skilled teachers. “Every teacher bears the burden of experimenting carefully and rigorously to identify the appropriate stimulation strategies that will provide students’ brains with an optimal daily enrichment.” (Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain*, p. 233) Does this sound more like the public or independent school classroom dynamic?

## Accountability of Leadership



Every community has to have leadership and a clearly outlined set of responsibilities that run from the head to the youngest child. Many leadership studies have been released during my career that have pointed to the importance of the head’s presence on and off campus. The tone of each independent school is set by the head of school. Respect, consistency, fairness, thoughtfulness, and most importantly, people-centered are qualities that a strong leader brings to a healthy educational community.

Human tribes and communities have always featured hierarchical organization, and independent school communities more naturally mirror this model. The outcomes of a benign, strong tribal organization are structure and safety for its inhabitants. These qualities free members of the community to safely take risks, to grow, and to share openly the joys of facilitating each other’s successes. This then, becomes the fertile ground in which the most significant growth can be fostered in our schools.

Heads of School are evaluated annually and multiple constituents of the school community are surveyed to assess the fairness, the student-centered focus, the public representation, and the business success of these leaders. The average tenure of Heads is more than 10 years according to research released by NAIS in January 2010. Mirroring athletic coaches, Heads of School have to deliver positive results to Board of Trustees and parent bodies (FOR CHILDREN) each year to justify the salaries that are most often two to four times that of their faculty.\*

Each person connected with an independent school, at its most highly developed evolutionary state, should feel growth educationally and personally. Professional development, parent education, and increased human connection around a meaningful venture, all become by-products of a meaningful relationship with a strong independent school. All of this happens for particular individuals in a public school community, but it is my strong opinion that the percentages lie strongly with the independent community that features ownership and accountability to raise — more than educate — children.

As a Latin teacher and student, it is hard not to make comparisons to the decline of the Roman Empire as I live in the United States in 2010. Our values as a society have become so vague and fuzzy we don’t have the sense of direction or motivation that our founding fathers had. They left us a democracy, guided by the American Constitution. The word democracy has Greek roots in the word, “demos,” or the people. Thus, our government, our country is ruled ultimately by the people.

If our people are to be prepared to assume this mantle of responsibility, there surely needs to be a drastic infusion of energy and improvement in our country's practice of educating its populous. Ms. Rhee, Chancellor of Education in Washington, DC is a breath of fresh air upon the public education scene. She represents connection, motivation, and a child-centered direction. It is my fear that she will flash across the sky only to burn out without fuel to keep her bright light illuminating our passage out of the current educational darkness.

### **America's Future**

The reign of global power that the United States has enjoyed over the past several centuries will not last with the current state of affairs in education. The technological revolution making us more dependent upon our minds than the strength of our backs is diluting our center of power. Friedman's *The World is Flat*, showed us how the shift would occur and now it is weakening our hold on the world because one no longer has to have resources, to gather resources. Education is power more today than ever before in man's history. Waiting for Superman cannot go unheeded and labeled a fairytale by the right as was Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Give the taxes back to the people. Use the casino money for education only. Have parents choose educational options for their children with the tax refund. (I really don't know. I am an educator who is very frustrated watching more and more of our children fall through the cracks of a broken educational system. )

Make administrators and faculty accountable for keeping their halls full and active. The future of America as we have grown to know and love her, depends on our infusing accountability into schools, teachers, administrators, and our parents. We are all responsible. We must face that along with democracy comes our capitalistic system. Currently, our capitalistic, free enterprise system is not engaged in the arena of public education. Can stronger business minds than mine determine how to connect the two, getting the best out of a free and competitive environment, without losing the humanity so critical to building healthy and productive educational environments for ALL of our children?

Until the public sector can ensure that our children will each be treated in a way that is responsive to their individual needs, we have to do our best, one at a time to save each child we can in the independent school sector. Linden Hill School is currently working with The Dyslexia Foundation on a research project, Academic Centers for Excellence, aimed at being able to ultimately share its findings of 'what works, and for whom' regarding research-based curricular interventions with the entire educational community, public and independent. The education of our populous is a responsibility we all share equally.

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