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## Board/Head Partnerships

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Healthy independent school board/head partnerships are characterized by the conditions of mutual respect and frequent communications. Mutual respect is a prerequisite of any partnership since the concept implies cooperation of equals rather than subordination to a hierarchy. An open mind and an open forum permit full discussion of all points of view – another prerequisite of mutual respect – remembering that the basis for decision-making should be the best interests of the students and program as defined by the mission of the school, not the personal agendas of any of the key leadership players.

Frequent and complete communication is a key support of mutual respect. More difficulties come about due to a lack of communication or miscommunication than any other cause. "FYI" is often all that is required; no surprises, in either direction, is the operating principle.

Understanding the respective roles of head and trustee fosters mutual respect and communication. A program of new trustee orientation and continuing education for all trustees is a key element in ensuring trust and understanding. Another key element is explicit, written, yearly evaluation of and goal-setting for both the head and the board to ensure that their performance and their mutual relationships are assessed and any problems identified before becoming intractable. (When relationship difficulties arise, the use of outside consultation can be a positive and supportive step toward the resolution of the distress). An explicit, written contract for the head of the school is a necessity to ensure mutual understanding.

The following principles define boundaries of and strategies for solidifying the partnership between head and board:

### Head's Responsibility to the Partnership

- Listening thoughtfully to the ideas and suggestions of the various constituencies and bringing significant ones to the attention of the board/board committees/board chair.
- Insisting that meetings between the head and the board chair are consistent and timely; attending as many board committee meetings as possible; meeting with individual trustees as frequently as is reasonable (and setting up a calendar structure for these meetings to happen).
- Recognizing that it is the responsibility of the head and the board chair to keep the board on task and in focus.
- Being positive and supportive of the board and its individual members in all public forums and occasions. Part of this is to help educate the other constituencies of the

school to the role and function of the board of trustees.

- Keeping the confidentiality of board discussions, as the head expects each member of the board to do.
- Understanding that board members are volunteers and busy people, offering the commodities that are in high demand and rare occurrence (time, expertise, resources, interest): Board members are deserving of efficiently run operations, adequate and focused background materials, and well-organized meetings.

### The Board's Responsibility to the Partnership

- Knowing that the head of the school is the CEO of the organization, charged with its day-to-day management, one who should be vested and trusted with the responsibility to do so.
- Ensuring that any disagreements with the head are discussed in a private forum, with confidentiality. Public discord between head and board/board member is *verboten*.
- Directing school problems to the attention of the appropriate school employee, usually the head.
- Educating the constituencies of the school as to the role of the board and the individual trustees and clarifying these respective roles. It is crucial that people associated with the school understand the boundaries of power and authority invested in the board and the head. The board does not generally function as a court of last appeal to overrule head decisions since it is not in its job description to regulate day-to-day operations. Rather, the role of the board is to hold the school in trust; i.e., to finance the school and plan for its future.
- Remembering that the head of school is not "answerable" to each, individual trustee, but rather to the board as a whole. The head should be judged in terms of the success of the school and in terms of the annual goals identified mutually by the head and the board, rather than being judged by the outcome of the crisis of the moment.
- Identifying with the difficulty of the job of head of school, given the competing and sometimes conflicting demands of the various constituencies of the school, including the board itself, and consequently offering empathy and support through difficult times.

Great schools house outstanding faculty, but they are built through the strong leadership of solid head/board partnerships.

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