

**Perception of Independent School Value**  
**Stephen Robinson, President**  
**Southern Association of Independent Schools**  
**June 1, 2009**

In November 2006, a study was commissioned by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) to assess the current opinions and perceptions of independent schools. This study, conducted by Shugoll Research, had the objectives of assessing attitudes toward quality objectives; assess awareness and perceptions of independent schools; and compare perceptions of independent schools to perceptions of public schools. This study provides some useful information that is worth consideration for independent school leaders. It speaks to the issues of what American parents value for their child's education as well as areas in which they perceive independent schools as no better than public schools.

As highlighted in my earlier discussion of the Value Proposition, the ability of a school to understand what families value in their school's program and what sets them apart from the alternative school (usually public) is paramount to marketing the school. The ten characteristics identified as being most important for a quality education in the NAIS study were (in rank order)

1. Providing a safe environment
2. Employing high-quality teachers
3. Maintaining discipline
4. Keeping students motivated and enthusiastic about learning
5. Supporting a climate that says it's okay to study and excel
6. Preparing students academically for college
7. Encouraging parents to participate in their child's education
8. Preventing drug and alcohol use
9. Preparing students for a life and career in a global economy
10. Using computers and other technology to enhance learning

Although it is understandable to most independent school educators that parents value this list of characteristics in their child's education, what might not be as readily evident is how our schools are perceived by those surveyed. A surprising percentage of those surveyed responded that they believed public schools are better or as good as independent schools on several of the characteristics. Understanding what is valued is only the first part of the equation; understanding where independent schools need to shore up their value in the eyes of the public, is yet another. With this in mind, a discussion of these results is appropriate.

In the following table the top ten characteristics in a quality education, as defined by the study, are listed. Additionally, for each characteristic it is reported the percentage of responses believing either that independent schools are better or that public schools are equal or better. The percentages are categorized by the two samples; random sample and high income (household incomes \$150,000+) sample.

<b>Table 4. Perceptions of Independent vs. Public Schools' Performance of the Top 10 Characteristics of a Quality Education*</b>				
Top 10 Characteristics of a Quality Education	Independent Better		Public Better or Both Do Well	
	Random	High-Income	Random	High-Income
Providing a safe environment	52%	54%	32%	36%
Employing high-quality teachers	47%	48%	36%	41%
Maintaining discipline	57%	62%	28%	27%
Supporting a climate that says its okay to study and excel	44%	56%	42%	34%
Keeping students motivated and enthusiastic about learning	48%	52%	37%	36%
Preparing students academically for college	49%	54%	36%	37%
Encouraging parents to participate in their child's education	43%	44%	41%	46%
Preventing drug and alcohol use	41%	34%	40%	44%
Preparing students for life and a career in a global economy	36%	40%	48%	49%
Using computers and other technology to enhance learning	30%	38%	53%	50%

\*Data taken and compressed from the NAIS National Public Opinion Survey conducted November 2006

On the top 10 characteristics of “*maintaining discipline*” and “*supporting a climate that says it’s okay to study and excel*” independent schools receive the highest positive perceptions from both sample groups when compared to public schools. On the top characteristic of “*Providing a safe environment,*” “*employing high-quality teachers,*” “*keeping students motivated and enthusiastic about learning,*” and “*preparing students academically for college*” both random sample and high income samples believe that independent schools do only a moderately better job than public schools. However, on the remaining four top characteristics, independent schools are perceived to be equal or less quality than the public schools. Both groups believe that on the characteristics “*encouraging parents to participate in their child’s education,*” “*preventing drug and alcohol use,*” “*preparing students for life and a career in a global economy,*” and “*using computers and others technology to enhance learning*” public schools do as well or better than independent schools. This is an understanding that should be considered by independent schools as they prepare their marketing strategies and the enhancement of their “perceived value.”

For families to make a decision to pay tuition, when public education is free, independent schools must represent a positive value differential (see Value Proposition white paper). If indeed the results of this referenced study accurately represent attitudes of American families, concern should be given and strategies developed to address this apparent

perceived value differential. It is when the value differential is sufficiently positive that families will choose to write tuition checks. The sustainability of independent schools is dependent on this effort.