

Annual Conference Address
Southern Association of Independent Schools
Stephen Robinson, President
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The past year has been quite a journey for the member schools of SAIS. Although many of your schools have opened this year meeting enrollment goals, many have experienced reductions in revenue and students, and even a few SAIS schools were unable to open this year.

We all hope that the recent gains in the stock market and signs of economic recovery are indeed reality and not just a mirage; however, all of us in this room are likely just a bit nervous about the coming years.

As an “independent school” you are completely dependent upon funding your operating budgets through tuition revenue, fund raising, and investment earnings. The discussion of sustainability is far more than just a “fad topic.” The discussion of sustainability is an imperative for all independent schools.

I am reminded of the head of school that was walking on the playground one day, when he observed a first-grade boy doing something curious. As he watched, the boy began to use his books and the books of others to create a pile in front of the door that connected the school with the playground. The stack was growing higher and higher as the school head watched.

“Young man” he asked, “what do you think you are doing there?”

“I am making a big wall,” replied the boy, “so that when the elephants attack the school, they’ll see it and get scared and run away.”

“Don’t be silly,” continued the head, “There are no elephants within 500 miles of here!”

“See how good it works,” said the boy.

“Son, you don’t understand. Even if the elephants decided to attack the school, they’re so far away that it would take them weeks and weeks to get here, so you don’t have to build that wall now.”

“Aha!” said the boy, “And if I waited for them to get here, it would be too late to start!”

I can’t stand here today and tell you whether or not the elephants are close or far away for your school. All I know is that if we do not take action now, when the elephants arrive, it may be too late.

Over the past year many of you have heard me speak of the “Value Proposition.” This proposition asserts that the independent school enrollment decision for families is made based on three variables. The first variable is the “ability to pay” (AP); the second

variable is the “perceived value of your school” (PV); and the third variable is the “perceived value of the alternative school” (AV).

If we think of these variables on a 0 to 10 scale, with zero being no ability or value and 10 being absolute ability or value, one will likely find that a multiple of “ability to pay” and a positive “perceived value differential” (VD) will dictate the likelihood of enrollment in your school.

For example, a family that possesses zero ability to pay tuition, no option to choose your school exists outside of financial aid. This is true even if they rate your school at 10 on the Perceived Value scale and rate the alternative as a 0 on the Alternative School Value scale.

Likewise, the family that rates a 10 on the Ability to Pay scale, yet does not see a positive Value Differential between your school and the alternative school, will not enroll in your school. It is when some level of ability to pay exists along with a positive Value Differential that families will make enrollment investments in an independent school.

As independent school leaders, you must first understand what it is about your program that your current families value. It is common for families to regard high quality academic programs and good teaching; opportunities for their child to participate in activities not possible for them at larger schools; safety from physical, emotional, and spiritual harm; and often most importantly the intimate size of the school which allows their child to be “known.”

However, each independent school should undertake a comprehensive discussion and study on exactly what values make your school special. It is then that a communication plan should be undertaken to ensure that current and prospective families alike perceive the highest value possible.

In November 2006, a study was commissioned by NAIS to assess the current opinions and perceptions of independent schools. This study, conducted by Shugoll Research, had as its purpose the assessment of attitudes toward school quality objectives; assessment of awareness and perceptions of independent schools; and a comparison of perceptions of independent schools to the perceptions of public schools. The study reported responses of two demographic samples; a random sample of 500 adults and a sample of 500 adults with children under the age of 18 and a household income of at least \$150,000.

The results of this study provide some useful information that should be considered by independent school leaders. The results identify issues that American parents value for their child’s education, as well as areas in which they perceive independent schools as no better than public schools. Given that a positive “value differential” must exist between your school and the local public school if families are to enroll their children in your school, I think that perceptions identified in this study should prove helpful.

The ten characteristics identified as being most valued for a quality education in the NAIS study were:

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 of us that parents value this list of characteristics for their child's education, what might not be as readily evident is how independent schools are perceived by those surveyed.

The results of the survey listed responses by sample group on whether independent schools are perceived as being better than public schools; whether public schools are perceived as better; or whether both do well. Given the need for a positive value differential to exist in order for a family to write a tuition check for education when the public schools can be attended for free, I have chosen to focus on the responses as two categories: either as independent schools doing better or as public schools doing better as well. If independent schools are just perceived as doing as well as public schools, families will not make an investment to enroll their children in our schools.

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.

According to this study, on the characteristics of "providing a safe environment", "employing high quality teachers," "maintaining discipline," "supporting a climate that says it's okay to study and excel," "keeping students motivated and enthusiastic about learning," and "preparing students academically for college," independent schools receive the highest positive perceptions from both sample groups when compared to public schools.

However, on the remaining four top characteristics, independent schools are perceived to be equal or of 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 to enhance 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. 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.

Most of us tend to operate under the assumption that if only families could afford to enroll their children in our schools that they would be “beating the door down” to get in. I personally believe that this should be the case. However, according to the Public Opinion Survey, over fifty percent of the respondents said that if money and distance between home and school were not barriers, they would choose a public school. This would indicate that over fifty percent of the families in our communities feel that the public school is a better choice for educating their children.

Of the “high income” sample, presumably the group where money would least likely be a factor, 35% of those preferring public schools indicated that they felt independent schools provide an unrealistic environment.

At least from the results of this study, I would argue that this attitude is one the greatest threats to the continued growth and success of independent schools. The notion is pervasive that independent school students are a “bunch of rich kids” that live in an “artificial environment” and will therefore not be prepared for the “real world” upon graduation. I would argue that this is a belief that we must work at dispelling; it in fact is just not true.

What is it that makes our independent schools the finest educational institutions in the world? It is not that our families represent a higher socio-economic status, for indeed those students of low SES who attend independent schools are equally prepared. It is not that independent schools are the only schools where excellent teachers work, for indeed there are many outstanding teachers teaching in public schools. It is not that independent schools are only located in areas of town where the best and the brightest reside, for indeed independent schools across the SAIS region most often share a neighborhood with a public school.

The reasons that independent schools are the best schools in the world are the result of a few simple but important characteristics that define an independent school.

1. Independent Schools “OWN” their missions. The mission is not prescribed to them by a government or other entity.
2. Independent schools are small learning communities where all children are known, and “falling through the cracks” is not an option.
3. Independent schools provide opportunities for “all” students to be involved in activities designed to educate the whole child. Independent schools recognize the true nature of students; mind, body, and spirit.

4. Independent schools can influence and control student behavior to a higher degree, thus ensuring less behavioral disruptions.
5. Independent schools can hire, develop, and retain excellent teachers while reserving the right to remove ineffective teachers.

If independent schools are to “keep the elephants” away, we must communicate our value proposition even better. We must communicate that which makes us special; that which families cannot live without.

We must also dispel the misconceptions that independent schools are not “real world” schools; for indeed there is no other type of school that provides students a more comprehensive introduction to a global perspective.

For many independent schools, the time has arrived when full enrollments will no longer happen just from “word of mouth” advertising. However, there is evidence that there is not a shortage of families with the means to write a tuition check.

Our task over the coming years is to persuade those families that an independent school education is the best opportunity possible for their children and that independent schools will provide their children with the best chance for success in a global environment. We must tell the story that independent schools will provide a community in which their child will not fall through the cracks and that independent schools will allow their child to experience a wider variety co-curricular experiences than would be possible anywhere else.

Independent schools are indeed the finest schools in America providing students the most substantial educational experience possible. It is time for all of us to reconsider the Value Proposition; to reconsider the value that each of our schools can provide families. It is time that we recommit to “telling the story” from the highest mountain top.

As your school community considers its value proposition and develops strategies to communicate that “story,” SAIS will be working along side you in this effort. I pledge to the leaders of all member schools that SAIS will do all we can as your association to inform and support your efforts.

SAIS schools represent the finest schools in the southeast United States and I know that this will be the case for many years to come. Be persistent, brave, and positive for independent schools are here to stay. We will continue to set the standard by which all schools are measured.

God Bless and enjoy you time at the conference.