Creating a Trusted Board Chair-Head Partnership to Lead Effective School Transformation
About The Children's School

- 49th Year
- Midtown Atlanta
- Age 3 - Grade 8
- 392 students

About Us

Nishant
- Started May 2013
- First headship

Michele
- TCS Board Chair, 2013-16
- TCS Board Member, 2011-2018
Research and Trends Analyses on Head-Board Partnership and Collaboration

Sources: NAIS and Michele M Reiner Consulting
Why Lead an Organization?

- Shaping and seeing impact on a mission
- Setting and driving action towards a vision
- Sharpening their leadership skills
- Shaping and guiding a team of staff and volunteers
- Identifying and solving challenges
Emerging Themes: NAIS and Michele M Reiner Consulting

- **Board (24% of respondents)**
  - Unclear direction/expectations, low support, no transparency in hiring
- **Mental Health (27% of respondents)**
  - Isolation, unhappiness, overwhelmed
- **Finances & Fundraising**
- **No Sense of Making an Impact**
- **Management**
  - Staff and culture challenges
- **Navigating Racial and Social Inequity**

Emerging Themes

- Heads of school (and many board members) agreed that big challenges include…
  - Head-board collaboration
  - Setting boundaries
  - Onboarding + orientation
  - HoS stress + support
  - Goals + assessment
Norms = Trust, Creative Friction and Culture

- Generosity
- Candor
- Support
- Protection
Generosity

- Both sides will **make mistakes and be uncertain**
- **Fear and concern** are part of the job
- Assume **positive intent**
- **Two-way street**
"That was probably the most difficult two years of my life, [in the role] for the first time and being still pretty arrogant . . . and not having the humility to have mentors and listen to others."

"Give board members the paradigm that in year one, they're volunteers, they do what they're asked; year two, they're advocates, they're happy to do things/starting to brainstorm; year three, they're champions, they should be coming up with the ideas."
Generosity: How It Shows Up

- Hold regular meetings
- Listen with intent, reflection and attention: No devices and no need for action
- Allow each other to make mistakes; imperfection is acceptable
- Give feedback, kindly
- Acknowledge the head may still be carrying their old school and position, and the school is likely holding on to their predecessor
Generosity: A Chair’s View

- Desire for HoS & School Success
- Experience in Leadership Role
- Empathy from those who didn’t want role
- Strong & Irreverent Executive Committee - navigate mistakes, challenges and transition
- NAIS Data - Confirmation of Common Themes
Candor

- **Surprises** breed confusion and distrust
- Leadership pairs who use candor are more likely to lead with courage and intention, rather than uneasiness and resentment
“I was in over my head a lot and having to figure things out. And so just being vulnerable and open to recognizing that you don't know it all… you've got to learn how to do this and you've got to do it in collaboration.”

“Go in with eyes open as opposed to the sort of blind enthusiasm that takes over in a job hunt.”
Candor: How It Shows Up

● No surprises, no secrets
● Honesty about challenges and uncertainty
● Honesty with feedback
● Hiring with clarity
● Cohesion on agendas, talking points, public materials
● Filling each other in on pertinent conversations with key constituents
● Asking for help when needed
● Providing help when you see a gap
Candor: A Chair’s View

● Clear goals, expectations & review process
● Weekly meetings/HoS openness & vulnerability
● NAIS Retreat/Commitment to ‘No Surprises’
● Strong Committee Structure & Executive Sessions: work done in public
● Board shared complaints & gossip
Support

- Role of cheerleader feels good and sets the stage for success when the pair must hold the necessary conversations around constructive feedback and realignment
“It was kind of a tough and kind of isolating position to be in, even our best board members probably weren’t lying awake at night worrying about [the organization].”

“It was, ‘Let me get through these two weeks’ & ‘Let me remind myself to eat’”
“I think that there is something about feedback and honesty and transparency that needs to be in the discussions. Those are really hard things to pull off. They take a lot of managerial time, and they take a lot of mood setting and culture building.”

“I would have stayed in the role if there was clarity and consistency in the organization's leadership.”

Support & The Research
Support: How It Shows Up

- Notice and acknowledge strengths and share them out loud
- Listen and empathize
- Acknowledge growth and recognize hard work
- Remind each other of past progress
- Provide/pay for an executive coach
- Create annual goals together, both organizational and professional/personal growth
- Provide annual review and quarterly check-ins to goal
- Require professional development as part of role
- Ask (and keep asking) 'where is your greatest challenge right now and how can I help'?
Support: A Chair’s View

● Executive Committee team mentality - “brains and brawn”
● Willingness to take off parent hat for long stretches of time
● Positive reinforcement from HoS, Board, NAIS
Protection

- Any leader doing their job well will face challenges.
- At this point, the chair and head should be ready to defend, shelter and support each other knowing that no matter the bumps, they are working towards their strategic goals around client and community impact.
“Most parents on the board really struggle with seeing their role as strategic and not pushing their own agenda.”

“When board members meet with disgruntled employees instead of funneling them to school leadership, there is wear and tear on the head of school… It’s death by a thousand cuts.”

“I needed to believe that at least one person was in my corner and that there was some creative positive energy in the room… And at the time, I didn’t see a single person with that sort of energy around me. And I knew I couldn't sustain it myself.”
Protection: How It Shows Up

- Understand the *why* behind challenge or crises
- Speak up and *advocate/defend*
- Accept mantle of role/*remember purpose*
- Ensure *legal counsel* when necessary
Protection: A Chair’s View

- Generous friendships and spouse
- Filter of strategic goals and intent
- “Hug the Ground”/You can’t stop it
- Disinterest in gossip
- Willingness to sacrifice parent experience
Let’s Stay Connected

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Q & A