



## **Casting the Net and Preparing Aspiring Heads for Independent Schools**

Mike Murphy

There is good news on the horizon for independent schools seeking new leaders to take on the roles of president, head of school, and other leadership positions. An increased willingness exists among gatekeepers such as board search committees and search consultants to look at women, people of color, LGBTQ leaders, and leaders from careers outside of education not only for the pool of finalists but to ultimately be named as head of school. Although independent and somewhat competitive, many universities, associations, grassroots programs, and current heads of schools are using research and feedback from new heads to refine programs that prepare aspiring heads to be successful. Mentoring aspiring leaders is viewed by many current heads as a personal and professional responsibility. In addition, boards and school heads are making coaching an acceptable practice for new heads and the lessons learned by new heads are being shared with aspiring leaders.

During the fall of 2020, while the COVID-19 pandemic was testing the leadership and sanity of heads, administrators, teachers, boards, students, and families, I reached out to educational leaders and organizations that are deliberate in their efforts to support aspiring leaders and, specifically, aspiring heads of school. Association presidents and executive directors, colleges and universities, consultants, grassroots organizations, heads of schools, and other school leaders dedicated to supporting and advancing women and people of color generously shared their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions on the talent pool of aspiring heads. In many cases, the relief from the intense focus on COVID-19 and school safety provided leaders a welcomed opportunity to share the work they had been doing for colleagues in their schools and around the country. I am indebted to all the people who contributed to the research and to all those who support our current and future leaders. Clearly, the desire to pay forward the support, guidance, and mentoring that was at one time provided to the current generation of independent school leaders is a driving force for many to give back to the next generation. For others, there is a call to social justice to ensure that all leaders have opportunities to take their place as heads in our schools if that is what they desire. Additionally, there are leaders who understand that the preparation of future leaders ensures that independent school students, teachers, and communities will remain a strong educational alternative into the future if the right leaders are prepared to move the schools forward.

## **The Big Step Forward**

Association executives from national, regional, and state organizations agree that only 20 percent to 25 percent of current heads have intentional plans to support aspiring leaders and aspiring heads. It could be that the role of head of school has become so complex and time-consuming that many heads, even those with good intentions, push development of leaders into the “parking lot” with other tasks they will address at some other time. It may also be that some heads are under pressure from boards and communities to retain high performers at all costs. There are many possible reasons why institutions designed to advance students do not have deliberate plans to advance faculty and administrators. Isn't that ironic?

Imagine if the National Association of Independent Schools' Principles of Good Practice for Heads of School added an expectation that heads have a plan in place to advance aspiring heads and other leaders. Imagine if the associations that manage accreditation were to make the development of aspiring leaders a standard for being considered a great school. I'm not suggesting a succession plan, but rather a leadership development plan. If we really want to open up leadership opportunities to a broader group of aspiring heads, we need to put the expectation on paper and give the goal some teeth. There is no doubt that adding one more thing to the plate of a head deserves a big eye roll. Yet, the 20 percent to 25 percent who are making deliberate efforts to plant seeds of leadership in the minds of their rising stars—the ones who provide leadership opportunities, who expose their aspiring leaders to board committees and board meetings, who mentor and ultimately advocate for their aspiring heads—are enriched and on fire from these efforts. Those who have built systems for leadership development and created distributive leadership models so they have time for mentorship do not express any burdens or regrets from supporting other leaders.

The big step forward is finding a way for more than 20 percent of sitting heads to commit to developing leaders. Clearly, this would require that heads have a commitment to learning how to develop leadership. Lessons from Heads and researchers who have proven models would need to be shared, practiced, and mastered.

A starting point could be to use the research gathered by Phil Peck, Head of Holderness while a graduate student at the Klingenstein Center.



## **Phil Peck's Research for Heads to Support Aspiring Heads**

His research includes:

- 1) The essential competencies (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) as identified by mentor heads
- 2) The strategies mentor heads use to develop future heads of school
- 3) The strategies that most influenced the aspiring heads' development
- 4) Strategies aspiring heads initiated for self-development

Using Peck's research, a head of school could have the following strategies in place:

1. Plan to delegate important work
2. Talk openly about being a head
3. Provide exposure to schoolwide finances
4. Give feedback
5. Hire well
6. Deliberately design leadership programs
7. Work with the board

Peck's research found that aspiring heads believe the following strategies were most helpful in preparing for a headship:

- a) When important work was delegated to them
- b) When they had regular meetings with the head
- c) When the head showed belief in the aspiring head
- d) When the aspiring head was exposed to board work

Peck also found that aspiring heads reported that they benefit most when they:

- a) Learn from mentors
- b) Seek mentors beyond the school
- c) Actively solicit feedback
- d) Develop networks
- e) Advocate for themselves professionally
- f) Learn from head searches
- g) Engage in formal professional development programs

## Other Big Steps

Keith Evans, President of the Westminster Schools in Atlanta, suggests that independent schools need to look at leadership development models researched and applied by industries outside of the educational field. Understanding how the leadership pipeline works in other fields could inform independent schools in ways not commonly considered today. A commitment to research about the elements that lead to the development of an effective head of school is seen as a great need. Keith points to the research found in [Rising to Power](#) by Ron Carucci and Eric Hansen as an example of the research that may help schools better prepare and select leaders.

Evans and David Mahler, Head at Out-of-Door Academy in Sarasota have led the Institute for Strategic Leadership for The Southern Association of Independent Schools. Both David and Keith point to the importance of helping leaders build capacity so they can think and lead strategically. There are doctoral theses, books, and a specialized career for those who take on the research for leadership development in independent schools.

Nicole Furlonge, Director of the Klingenstein Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, believes there is a valuable network of potential mentors and coaches who are alumni of her program and other university programs that focus on the development of independent school leaders and aspiring heads. During the past four years, The Klingenstein Center has provided coaching to emerging leaders of color who are alumni, free of charge. Coaching and mentoring, although new, are becoming common professional benefits for new heads and for aspiring heads. While many retired heads and consultants have created businesses around coaching and mentoring, Peter Bachmann, Emeritus Head of School at Flintridge, with support from the E.E. Ford Foundation, is working to develop a sliding scale coaching model that will support new heads. One of Bachmann's goals is to create a cohort of heads and retired heads who will share different models of coaching and mentoring with the intention of better defining what best helps new heads. Of course, these lessons will be transferable when offered to aspiring heads.

Additionally, board education and education of the faculty will be important. I had firsthand experience with a group of board members who called an "emergency meeting" to create golden handcuffs for one of my administrators who had been offered his first headship. I remember an email from a faculty member who asked why I was trying to get people to leave our school because I was sharing career opportunities on the faculty/staff email address. Not everyone understands, or even cares, that leadership development transcends the present and makes us stronger for the future. We need to make progress in this area.

The big steps forward have many elements. The head is a key. Association and accreditation associations could also play a role. University programs, grassroots programs, and dedicated mentors can be the lever that ignites and launches a new leader. Clearly, search firms and search committees representing a board are also critical. But next to the head of school, the greatest responsibility falls on the aspiring heads.

An aspiring leader could look at the information gathered by Phil Peck and build a deliberate plan to address the skills and experiences Peck and others have learned are important for success as a new head of school. Other heads, association executives, and college and university program directors shared the following suggestions:

**If you are an aspiring head:**

- 1) Your mentors and head of school are critical. You need people who will give you opportunities with hiring, curriculum development, communication, board committees, finance, fundraising, strategic thinking and all kinds of leadership roles. Have a plan for targeted skills preparation.
- 2) You need to have someone who will ask you why you make decisions. This will help solidify your philosophy of education.
- 3) You will benefit if someone asks you, “What would a head of school do?” And then, debate your response.
- 4) If you attend the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring School Heads, be sure your school is committed to give you exposure to the ideas you hear and learn.
- 5) Expand your social network as much as you can. Reach out to educators in all locations. Find mentors. Join affinity groups. Reach out to search consultants.
- 6) Attend the NAIS People of Color Conference to learn about opportunities for leadership development and connect with leaders and potential mentors.
- 7) Attend the Heads Network’s women’s leadership seminars.
- 8) Lead or serve on your school’s accreditation team and serve on accreditation teams at other schools. Your leadership will be tested, and you will be able to observe other leadership styles while learning how to look at schools with a broad lens.
- 9) Know yourself. What is your EQ? Can you say, “No?” Do you have the stamina to do the work, day in and day out? Do you demonstrate equanimity in the face of challenges?
- 10) Put in the time. Spend years learning the different aspects of school leadership and school operations. Make a difference where you are.
- 11) Seek out schools that have a mission, vision, and core values that align with your own.



## **Expanding the Pool**

The NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring School Heads is led by Jay Rapp and Vince Watchorn and is taught by nine current heads who dedicate a minimum of one full year to supporting and mentoring the fifty-five participants. The Florida Council of Independent Schools' Aspiring Heads Program is led by Dr. Barbara Hodges. The women's leadership seminars sponsored by the Heads Network is directed by Margaret "Sissy" Wade and is led by Ann Klotz and a dedicated team of heads, focusing specifically on aspiring heads.

Underrepresented groups like women, people of color, and LGBTQ leaders often face challenges that their white male counterparts mostly avoid. Thankfully, organizations like NAIS (with the People of Color Conference and Fellowship for Aspiring School Heads) and The Heads Network (with the women's leadership seminars and the National Coalition of Girls' Schools) provide opportunities for people of color and women to unite as affinity groups and learn from each other, develop networks, and identify mentors.

## **People of Color Leadership Programs**

There is a dynamic generation of heads of color who are committed and passionate in their efforts to prepare the next generation of aspiring heads.

In 1995, Dennis Bisgaard started the Collegiate School Teaching Institute for Educators of Color with the goal of attracting teachers of color to independent schools in New York City. The two-week summer program partnered with the Klingenstein Center at Columbia University and flourished for six years. When Bisgaard moved on to become Assistant Head at Shady Hill School, new leadership picked up the reins and directed the program for eleven more years.

When Dennis Bisgaard became Head of Kingswood Oxford School, he established the Kingswood Oxford Leadership Institute for Educators of Color. Again, Pearl Kane from Klingenstein, along with Wanda Holland Green, Ara Brown, and other leaders, came forward to inspire, teach, and mentor aspiring leaders and heads. The program ran for six years and became the model for ILINYC with Dr. Noni López from The Gordon School taking the lead.

Bisgaard's influence resulted in similar programs in Chicago and Atlanta. All of these programs come from the personal and professional commitments of the heads of color who are



doing all they can to create conditions to attract leaders and prepare them to be successful. A challenge with some programs is that they often end when the leader, like Bisgaard, moves on.

Today, women and people of color can find support from grassroot programs like those initiated by leaders like Dennis Bisgaard and modeled by Dr. López and her faculty at The Interschool Leadership Institute as well as Steve Morris, Percy Abram, and Alison Park with the Professional Learning Community for Emerging Leaders of Color. The California Teacher Development Collaborative (CATDC) hosts the Women Rising Seminar and Developing Your Leadership Capacity, a program for aspiring and current Heads. Women's Leadership Circle, founded by Regan Galvan, Carol Swainson, and Azizi Williams, continues to serve female leaders around the greater Los Angeles area.

The NAIS People of Color Conference has been a consistently central meeting place and a valuable forum for social networks, program development, mentoring, and inspiration.

### **The Traditional Pathway**

The country is dotted with heads and aspiring heads who were in the Klingenstein Program at Columbia University. Pearl Kane and Nicole Furlonge have created a fertile environment for the development of independent school leaders. Penn State, Vanderbilt, Johns Hopkins, George Mason, and Kennesaw State have leadership programs targeted at the independent school leaders. The graduate schools at Harvard and Stanford are also programs that produce inspired and thoughtful independent school leaders. The Center for Creative Leadership stands out as providing programs for leaders of all ranks and ambitions. Educators who enroll in CCL programs often find themselves to be the only educator in their program. They leave enlightened by new ways of thinking about themselves and their schools.

### **Who Will Take the Lead?**

The worries about Baby Boomer retirements, burnout of current heads, high turnover rates, and other concerns are not limited to the world of independent schools. Every industry is experiencing change and transitions. The independence and broad range of programs offered by most independent school associations, colleges, and universities has not resulted in an expanded and well prepared pool of aspiring heads. Clearly, some organizations have tried and have made a difference for the participants.

There is a need for an association or a university to be strategic and set themselves up as the center for research and training for leaders who wish to be heads of school. There is a need for



an association or organization to track the pathways that successful heads have taken before and after being named head of school. University programs could be strengthened if they had faculty dedicated to independent school educators. Finally, and most importantly, heads of schools and retired heads need to join those who already dedicate their time and talent to support aspiring leaders.

### **University Programs Designed for Independent Schools to Support Aspiring Heads**

- Columbia University, Klingenstein Center Master's Degree Program, Nicole Brittingham Furlonge, Director
- Vanderbilt University, Independent School Leadership Program, Patrick Schuermann, Director
- University of Pennsylvania, School Leadership Program: Independent School Track, Steve Piltch, Director
- Johns Hopkins University, Educational Leadership for Independent Schools, Annette Anderson, Director
- Kennesaw State University, Independent & Charter School Leadership Certificate, Dr. Susan Banke, Program Coordinator
- George Mason University, Educational Leadership, Independent School Leadership Concentration, Charlie Kreitzer, Executive Director for Online Operations

### **Association Programs Specifically for Aspiring Heads**

- National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), Fellowship for Aspiring School Heads, Vince Watchorn and Jay Rapp
- Florida Council of Independent Schools (FCIS), Aspiring Heads Program, Dr. Barbara Hodges, Executive Director
- The Heads Network, women's leadership seminars, Margaret "Sissy" Wade, Director
- CAIS, leadership programs, Deborah Dowling
- California Teacher Development Collaborative (CATDC), Leadership Fellows Program, Developing Your Leadership Capacity: A Program for Aspiring Heads, and Women Rising, Lisa Haney, Director
- National Coalition of Girls' Schools, Aspiring Educational Leaders, co-facilitated by Ann Klotz and Ayanna Hill-Gill
- ATLIS Leadership Institute, Christina Lewellen
- North Carolina Association of Independent Schools, Women in Leadership, Stephanie Keaney





- Center for Creative Leadership, CCL.org
- ISANNE LEADS program. ISANNE has merged with AISNE, Eliza Alexander and Claire Leheny
- GISA, Emerging Leaders Program, Jeff Jackson.

### **Grassroots Efforts**

- Women's Leadership Circle in Los Angeles, founded by Regan Galvan, Azizi Williams, and Carol Swainson. 2020 leaders are LaToya Franklyn, Emily Singer, Jennie Williams, and Gage Loveless.
- Learning Community for People of Color in the San Francisco Bay Area and in the Pacific Northwest, led by Alison Park from Blink Consulting, Perry Abram from Bush School, and Steve Morris from San Francisco School
- Interschool Leadership Institute (Ilinyc.org) Dr. Noni Thomas López

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