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Why Choose an Independent School?

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Independent schools are unique.

By generally agreed upon definition, an independent school is *independent* in two critical ways:

- **Independent in governance** (meaning that the schools are organized as not-for-profit and non-discriminatory corporations governed by a self-perpetuating board of directors, as opposed to being "owned" and run by the government (public schools), by a diocese (parochial schools) or by for-profit entities (proprietary schools).
- **Independent in finance** (meaning that the schools charge tuition and raise money to operate themselves, as opposed to being supported primarily by public monies or religious subsidies).

It is the *independence* of independent schools that offers to them the four essential freedoms that make independent schools strong:

1. The *freedom* to define their own mission (why they exist, whom they serve).
2. The *freedom* to regulate admissions (admitting only those students appropriate to the mission).
3. The *freedom* to define teacher credentials (hiring, particularly in the middle school and upper school grades, liberal arts graduates who have majored in a discipline and who have a passion about teaching the subject).
4. The *freedom* to teach what the teachers decide is important (free from state curricular and textbook and testing mandates).

It is important to note that independent schools, contrary to popular belief and their portrayal in the media, are not "elitist" in any way except in terms of academic expectations: The typical independent school often has *more* diversity (racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically) than the neighboring public schools (many of which are quite homogeneous). The socioeconomic diversity of independent schools, for example, is supported by a significant commitment to financial aid: Independent school students come from all family income levels, and approximately 20 percent of them typically are supported by financial aid.

Although independent schools continue to attract "legacies" (i.e., relatives and siblings of graduates and current students), the largest contingent of independent school students now comes from erstwhile public school families, sometimes refugees from public schools that are failing in one way or another but increasingly converts from "good public schools": i.e., those public schools privileged with an economic base and socioeconomic demographics that make them otherwise comparable to independent schools.

Independent school market research has long shown that families new to independent schools choose our schools primarily because they perceive the quality of teaching to be exceptional and the moral climate to be appropriate. Surveys of independent school parents reveal a remarkably high level of satisfaction from and support of the parents in our schools ("total positive" responses counting only the top two of six possible answers choices: i.e., *strongly agree* and *agree* or *excellent* and *very good*):

1. Positive school spirit is evident.
2. The school has a strong commitment to moral values and character development.
3. The school supports academic achievement.
4. The school has a caring and community environment.
5. Overall quality of education.
6. Likelihood to recommend the school.
7. Likelihood to continue supporting the school.

8. Likelihood to increase support of the school.

Longitudinal research confirms the wisdom of choosing an independent school. Comparisons of independent school students with those from "privileged" suburban public schools reveal the pattern for success that favor those who attend independent schools. Roughly speaking, students from independent schools are about twice as likely (or more) than their counterparts in "privileged suburban schools" to:

- Take algebra I and foreign language in the eighth grade.
- Enroll in an A.P. course as a sophomore.
- Study with a teacher who has graduated from a "Top 100" most selective college.
- Complete pre-calculus or higher level of mathematics.
- Play on a junior varsity or varsity sport.
- Participate in extracurricular arts, academics, and/or community service.

Sources: Powell (*Lesson from Privilege*), Heath (*Schools of Hope*), National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)

The patterns indicated above begin in our elementary schools, which place a strong emphasis on creating a positive learning climate for each child, and are sustained through our middle and upper schools, where children are "expected" to do well academically and "needed" to participate extracurricularly.

Why are these patterns important? Because they reflect two critical elements that make independent school students well prepared for college and for life:

- Mastering of a serious academic program.
- Being a "player."

The "lessons" of the research are clear. College admission is dependent on the two factors indicated above, since what is most important to college is evidence that a student can undertake a program of rigorous academic study and indication that the student can and will contribute to the community outside of the classroom. What is even more important to students and parents is the "persistence" factor: i.e., whereas only about 40 percent of 25-year-olds have actually completed college, virtually all independent school graduates not only attend college but graduate as well. The ethos of independent schools contributes to this equation, since "everybody" is expected to work hard and succeed academically and since "everybody" is expected to be "a player." (The latter is particularly significant, since the greatest predictor of success in college and thereafter is not grades or S.A.T. scores but involvement in extracurricular life, where the life skills of "playing fair," "being a team player," "winning and losing gracefully," "performing in front of an audience," etc. are developed and nurtured.) Since independent schools tend to be small (averaging around 500 students--even in larger schools, the divisions of lower, middle, and upper school tend to be around 500 or fewer students), it is necessary for everyone "to be a player." The outcome of this necessity is that even average kids end up being exceptional contributors, a pattern in independent schools that translates into success thereafter for our graduates.

Finally, independent schools are different as well in terms of the effectiveness of the partnership between parents and schools: We speak in a unified voice about a common set of goals and values, and it is this coalescing of parental and school voices that points students, like a clarion bell, towards achievement and guides them towards decent behaviors and good citizenship.

Author: Patrick F. Bassett, president, NAIS. An earlier version of this monograph originally appeared on the ISACS website (www.isacs.org). Source: www.nais.org · Permission: NAIS grants permission to print this document, without alteration.

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