



Indicators of Quality: Measures of School Success

The board is responsible for the long-term health of the school and for monitoring the progress of the institution in meeting its mission. They must have relevant information to allow them to make judgments necessary to fulfill this responsibility. Both current data and analysis of trends are essential. PNAIS recommends that every school develop a list of that information and those types of analysis which will be systematically gathered and reviewed by the governing body annually.

Independent Schools define their own mission and goals. **For any assessment of success, the indicators selected, the measures used and the analysis applied should all relate to the specific mission and context of the school.** While different constituents may have different criteria to measure satisfaction (a parent, for example, may look no further his or her child's grades), trustees have a particular obligation to maintain their focus on broad institutional issues. Each school must design its own approach to "indicators of quality," but PNAIS suggests the following categories be considered.

Institutional: The first component of overall institutional strength which requires assessment is the board itself. No school will thrive over time without a well organized and functioning board which maintains a steady, long-term perspective and avoids "quick fix" reactions when addressing issues. Other commonly measured institutional factors relate to financial stability and adequacy of resources to support the program, both short and long term.

Program: Before designing an assessment of the school's program, the board needs to be sure that it has clearly articulated the school's mission and has a shared view of education and the characteristics of an educated person the school seeks to foster in its students. The board should be informed by the head about the strength of the faculty, the vitality of the curriculum and the nature of the learning environment. The board must make itself aware of program issues without intruding on the daily operations of the school.

Emotional Climate and Leadership: The quality of community life and the effectiveness of leadership are critical indicators of the health of the school. Is the energy of the school focused where it should be - on program and students? Is the communication system effective in informing everyone of salient issues and preventing bad feelings and disruption based on rumor and misunderstanding?

The Student Experience: Ultimately the success of any school must be measured in terms of student experience, the growth and development of its students while they are at the school. Whom does the school serve? What are the expectations? How are they met? As with most issues of human development, there are components which will require subjective forms of measurement and even the so-called "objective" measures will require interpretation.

The board has a unique responsibility within the school to focus on the long term. The long view calls for analysis of trends and directions, as well as a snap shot of the moment. In each of the areas to be assessed, one key component of attention should be the long range plan or perspective of the board: What are the goals? What progress is being made to achieve them?

At times, formal outside assessment of an area may be helpful to the board. For example, every seven years a PNAIS member school will participate in a thorough accreditation review which culminates with a Visiting Team Report and a number of recommendations which require response from the constituencies of the school.

Institutional Indicators (Current Information and Trends)

Overall institutional indicators relate to effective governance and financial stability. Difficulties in either of these areas would clearly place the school at risk.

Governance: The first responsibility of the board is to evaluate its own performance. The long term health of the school is dependent on an effective, functioning board. Four areas are vital: the makeup of the board, the structuring of the work of the board, the participation of individual board members and the thorough evaluation of board functioning. (Some objective information may be gathered, but the assessment of the effectiveness of the board is largely subjective. Among other things, it may be useful to analyze the way the board handled a difficult issue it faced during the past year.)

- What is the profile of the board? Is there a plan for what characteristics (skills, attitudes, experience) are desired in trustees?
- How stable is the board in its membership and leadership?
- How appropriate to trusteeship are the goals and agendas for the board and each committee?
- Is a long range or strategic plan in place and updated annually with reports from committees?
- What is the level of participation of trustees: in attendance, participation in projects and giving?
- Does the board have a way to ensure that individual members observe appropriate standards of behavior as trustees?
- How is an evaluation of board and committee functioning conducted?

Finance: The trustees are responsible for the short- and long-term financial stability of the school. In addition to regular reports during the year on the annual budget, the board or its finance committee should examine long range trends and progress toward financial goals. The major components of income (enrollment and voluntary giving) and the major components of expense (salary levels and staffing ratios) should be monitored. (Financial statistics are easily gathered, but subjective judgments are required to project trends and figures must be placed in the context of policy decisions regarding goals.) Trustees could receive grade level enrollment data for three to five years which tracks enrollment configuration, admissions and retention. (How successful is the school in attracting, enrolling, and retaining those students it seeks at each grade level.)

- Over a five year period how successful has the school been in staying on budget?
- What reserves (deficits) have accumulated? Are projected?
- Is a financial plan in place and reviewed annually, which addresses plant maintenance and expansion, staffing and compensation levels, reserves and financial aid?
- How sensitive is the school to fluctuations in enrollment? What are the sources of income other than tuition and how are they keeping pace with overall increases in the budget?
- What is the admissions record by grade level for inquiries, applications, admissions and enrollments? What are the trends?
- What are the retention statistics by grade level? Why do families leave?

Programmatic Indicators (Current Information and Trends)

The program of an independent school is closely related to mission and must be assessed in that context. The board should be informed by the head of school concerning faculty and aspects of the instructional context.

Mission: For the mission of the school to be more than words it must be understood by all constituencies and applied as a standard in decision making by trustees and staff.

- A good first step in testing the commitment to mission is to ask various constituents, beginning with the trustees, to explain their understanding of it and how it shapes school policy.

Faculty: The strength of a faculty can only be assessed in the context of the school's mission, curriculum, and student body. Trustees should receive information on what qualities the school looks for in its faculty. Individual profiles or case studies might be valuable to illustrate faculty strength. A practice of

brief presentations by different faculty members at board meetings might provide an opportunity for trustees to observe those qualities first hand. Some statistical data is also useful.

- What is the overall faculty profile and how has it changed over five years: number of full and part time, years of experience, match of qualifications relevant for school's needs?
- What is the turnover in faculty? A five year report on faculty attrition with reasons for departures might be helpful.
- Do new hires further strengthen the faculty? Individual profiles of new faculty might be reviewed along with an explanation of special qualities it is hoped they will bring.
- Are faculty aware of current educational research? Are they involved professionally outside the school?
- Professional development activities provide one perspective on faculty strength. What professional development was provided on campus and at what cost? What funds (total and average per teacher) were available for off campus professional development? How many faculty participated? Are funds available for faculty research?
- What goals for strengthening the faculty are included in the long range plan?

Instructional Context: Trustees should be aware of factors which influence the learning environment and of changes in the curriculum or overall program. Some statistical information could be reviewed annually for changes and trends. An annual tour of the facilities by some or all trustees may also be appropriate.

- What are class sizes by department and/or grade level and how have they changed over five years?
- What are student/faculty ratios by department and/or grade level and how have they changed?
- Are the facilities adequate? How have they changed and why? What progress has been made toward attaining long range goals for improvement?

Curriculum: Designing the curriculum is the business of professional educators, not the board of trustees. Nonetheless, the board does have a responsibility for assuring that a vital curriculum is in place: one which is responsive to today's students and is adequately funded.

- What process is followed for curriculum development? Does it assure thoughtful decision making?
- What is new and exciting in the curriculum? (Reports by faculty at board meetings may be instructive.)

Emotional Climate and Leadership (Current Information and Trends)

A positive climate of cooperation and trust among all constituents, loyalty and enthusiasm of staff and leadership which anticipates change and pursues best practices may be the keys to resilience in time of crisis. By attending to these qualities, the board will ensure a healthy school in the present and one which is prepared to meet adversity in the future.

School Climate: A school is an intense community of people made up of several distinct constituencies with varying degrees of connectedness. For many schools, the quality of interaction is a part of the stated mission; for all schools, the emotional climate of the school should be a matter of the highest concern. It is the quality of communication, the degree of trust and mutual respect and the sense of common commitment and purpose which enables a school to embrace necessary change and to thrive even in a time of crisis. Measuring the emotional climate requires special sensitivity from trustees, who are often somewhat removed from the school community, because they must attend to the interpersonal working of the school without delving inappropriately into the tasks of management.

- How effective are the systems for communication among parents, students and faculty?
- Is the appropriate role for parents clearly communicated?
- Is the school environment one in which difficulties can be discussed? Is there tolerance of ambiguity? Can issues of concern be left open while appropriate resolution is sought? (The board may wish to analyze of the school's handling of a difficult situation, including the response of the several constituencies).
- What means does the board have to obtain an objective perspective on school climate?

Leadership: Effective leadership is essential to the health of the school. Trustees have primary responsibility for hiring, supporting and evaluating the head of school.

- Does the board have a contract with the head of school which provides for the head's personal and professional needs? Is it reviewed annually?
- Does the board regularly solicit the head's perspectives and priorities concerning school issues?
- Is the relationship between board and head characterized by trust and mutual respect?
- Does the board set clear policy which enables the administration to function with consistent direction?
- Is there an annual evaluation of the head which includes a self-assessment component, clear feedback regarding the board's assessment of the head's performance, as well as goal setting for the new year?
- Was the most recent departure of the head of school characterized by a thoughtful transition?

The Student Experience (Current Information and Trends)

The program of an independent school is finally judged by the experience of its students. The approach to assessment is highly individual to the school, its philosophy and its particular student body. The concept of what constitutes an educated person is subjective, as is the design of a program to achieve that goal.

Student Growth and Development - Subjective Qualities: Any assessment of the student experience must begin with the mission of the school and the profile of the student body. Were the students admitted those who matched the school's mission? What qualities does the school seek to foster in the students? What are the school's expectations for them? Much of the data for this assessment is subjective.

- What qualities does the school seek to foster in its students? What opportunities are available to demonstrate them? (i.e. If the school seeks to foster leadership or risk taking or independent intellectual inquiry, what opportunities do students have to demonstrate and practice these qualities?) Case studies of individuals can be helpful to illustrate the qualities sought and how they are exhibited.
- How do students fare at the next level of education? Reports from receiving schools - if available - and surveys of alumni can be very helpful in assessing the success of the school's program in meeting the needs and expectations of its students.
- How successful have the students been over three to five years in admission to the two or three top schools of their choice?
- Parent satisfaction is another measure of success, especially with young children, and may be measured through surveys, interviews, or informal observation.

Student Growth and Development - Objective Measurements: It would be convenient to be able to generate a simple numerical report on student success and the quality of a school. Unfortunately assessment of student growth and achievement cannot be reduced to such a format. There may be some relevant information in test scores, but it must be presented with great care to prevent simplification and misinterpretation.

- What is the student profile? Who is admitted? By what criteria? If tests are used for screening what are results? (This information provides an essential base for analysis. Students in a school for the gifted will clearly score differently than students in a special needs school. Objective data, such as test scores, must be analyzed in the context of the student admissions profile.)
- If school-wide achievement testing is done, an analysis of the results for three to five years may be useful. Raw averages are rarely informative. How does the administration and faculty use the data?
- A special focus of a school might warrant objective testing in a particular area. (For example, a school which offers immersion language might choose to administer a language proficiency test.)
- How do the students score on required admissions or achievement tests (ISEE, SAT, CEEB) - if the information is available?