

Leadership Survey Results

The Education Group

What is appealing about the head of school job?

What leads us to it and keeps us there? On the other hand, what are its perils?

What makes it a complex and sometimes controversial one?

Thank you for participating in our Leadership Taskforce Survey. We hope you find the results as interesting as we did.

Of all respondents, with an average tenure in current positions of 5.3 years, here is a composite of positions held by you and your colleagues:

With few exceptions and some trepidation, most of the key administrators aspire to be heads of school. 58% of respondents came from ISACS' Midwestern states group. Next came responses from the South, closely followed by the West and Mid-Atlantic. Responses from the Northeast and Southwest were negligible.

Thanks to all those who participated in the survey, The Education Group has clear indicators of interest in regional workshops and a dozen or so specific areas of concentration identified.

Said one respondent: "I've already climbed in the saddle again, but looking at the list of topics below, I only wish that I had a resource like this."

And, "The preview topics still are of great interest even though I've been through the transition twice already and am gearing up for a third time."



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CONs to Becoming a Head of School

If you cannot handle eight irons in the fire at one time, do not take on a headship.

★★★★★

It's very hard work.

★★★★★

No life outside work. It can absolutely absorb your entire life.

★★★★★

It seems like a 24-7 commitment and I'm struggling with the 60-70 hour weeks I have now.

★★★★★

Taking a headship would pull me away from education and into the board world of fundraising and hobnobbing.

★★★★★

The daunting challenge of attempting to move entrenched faculty into the 21st Century.

★★★★★

Be realistic about the highs and the lows There are those ready to laud your every move as well as critics around every corner.

"The difficulties facing all schools these days: achieving inclusiveness from diversity, attracting new teachers (esp. minority teachers), keeping the traditional teacher/coach model, and expanding the applicant pool while maintaining financial aid budget."

— Survey respondent

Unanimously cited among those cons to being a school heads were the time and stress of the job -- loss of privacy, quality of life and the isolation of the position. These concerns joined others as major deterrents to seeking headships. In order of frequency, the following were given:

1. Time and the stress of the position
2. Diminished contact with students and faculty
3. Work with board with heavy parent representation
4. School politics
5. The challenge of the multi-faceted role of the head

For women respondents, a limited number of women in heads positions was a noteworthy concern.

100% of respondents cited TIME and STRESS

By far the biggest prices to be paid were centered on personal stress and balance in giving your all. "TIME!!!!!!," said one. Others elaborated, linking time to overwhelming constraints, demands, and commitments. When considering the darker side of being or becoming a head, virtually 100% of our respondents cited time and stress as primary factors and the challenges both concerns posed to leading a balanced life. How does one balance "personal and professional passions?" How does one do the "everything" that is required, with working crazy hours, little vacation, not enough down time, and too many night meetings?

Sources of stress all pointed back to loss of time for self as well as with friends and family, "difficult" demands on family, and the stress of having the disparate skills for the job. Not atypically, the needs of spouses, children and aging parents were mentioned with some frequency. One writer observed, "Level of pay is not enough for hours and work put in." Other quotes tell other details of the story.

The responsibilities were described as huge, too much at times. Others felt that the isolation in the job, lack of privacy, quality of life concerns, and lack of adequate support only add to other job stress.

I worry about board training, or the lack of it, and whether I want my future determined by people who may or may not get it.

★★★★★

Need to exercise many skills, many of which you don't really have.

★★★★★

You're expected to have expertise in all areas - financial to public speaking.

★★★★★

It seems to be an "old boy" network and as a woman, that doesn't appeal to me.

★★★★★

Potential need to move family around the country pursuing headships.

★★★★★

I am only as safe as my last decision.

★★★★★

One noted with final irony, "First rule of leadership - everything is your fault" - the buck sure "stops here."

One current head looked to the brighter side: "Actually, I believe there are few cons to this work, as long as you are aware of the pressures involved."

Contradictory expectations by different constituents and vulnerability to personal attacks or rumor when a constituent does not agree with you troubled others. One summed it up this way: " (All those demanding) customers to satisfy gets to be a bit much.

STUDENTS and FACULTY: Constituencies lost

Because many heads come to their first headship via a division head route, it is no surprise that many respondents correctly forecast student contact diminishing in the head's world. Almost 1/3 of the respondents cited the lessening of interaction, primarily with students, but also with faculty, a perceived loss. Another specifically cited "inability to be in the classroom making a difference with individual students." Yet another, "Distance from the students becomes even more pronounced." Another wondered, "Would an assistant headship allow for more direct involvement in the running of the school?"

BOARDS and PARENTS: Constituencies gained

"Working with a board" looms as a less than an attractive opportunity, and was the most frequently articulated concern in this category. Both sitting heads and those anticipating a first headship cited the difficulties posed by either their own or the board's inexperience or lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. The unpredictability, interference, and "headaches" of boards with significant parent representation were singled out for comment in a number of cases. Unrealistic expectations, keeping a board pleased and working with difficult boards were all mentioned with some frequency. More than a few suggested that boards' fear of litigation ruled too many of their decisions. "Few board members have nonprofit board experience prior to joining our schools' boards, thus not understanding the appropriate roles."

"I hate the conflict management, very demanding **PARENTS**." To a lesser degree, working with parent, school constituencies and other external issues concerned future and current heads. "There are always those few never satisfied customers, "parents who do not behave as partners in the education of their children," and "parents who believe that the school is only a training ground for college admission." Others found the prospects of school politics and balancing school vs. parent values potentially troublesome.

The challenge of **MULTI-FACETED ROLES**, especially the emphasis on fundraising, elicited comments from about one out of seven respondents. Fundraising and business aspects of school management were often named as the two least favorite parts of the job, and legal liability emerged as a theme. "I am an educator at heart. he constant

need to fundraise would be tiresome” and would cancel out many of the “pro’s” listed.

Just a handful mentioned gender or **WOMEN’S ISSUES**, but those few generated quotable thoughts: “I am concerned about my prospects given my status as a single woman - has the independent school world embraced the same kind of enthusiasm for diversity in terms of hiring heads as they have in addressing the needs of students and faculty?” and, “Few schools are genuinely interested in hiring women heads, as evidenced in the small percentage of women leading schools, and the even smaller percentage of experienced women heads getting their second school head position.”

FAMILY, FINANCIAL AND RELOCATION are “all the usual family matters that other boomers are coping with...and impact...my decision to stay in (my current position)” summarizes the concerns of many. Anxiety related to relocation of family was coupled with other indicative phrases, “hesitate,” “huge burden on family,” “toll,” “family life suffers enormously,” and “I have to fight for time with my family.” Many indicated that relocation alone is a *major* issue.

Cons related to **JOB INSECURITY** produced a range of ideas, but most comments fit into one of these categories:

- Short tenure and turnover of school heads; “getting fired every 4 years”, AND, “would I find the right job only to be embroiled in school turmoil and relieved of my position after four or five years -- and then have to start the whole thing all over again at another school?”
- The right philosophical match: School “fit” with style and beliefs
- Insecurity of having requisite skills and competencies: “Need to exercise many skills, many of which you don’t really have...a Catch-22.”