Measuring a School’s Effectiveness: Appropriate and Inappropriate Approaches

I. The Board’s Need:

Boards of trustees today are asking heads to help them determine how effective IS the educational process at the School. If boards are not to cross professional boundaries and lines of communication with faculty and parents, what information must the head provide to ensure them of the school's effectiveness?

Increasingly boards are asking for teacher evaluation information, standardized test scores, parent and faculty surveys, as well as the usual bottom line information about budget, enrollment projections, levels of charitable giving, university placement and achievement test scores.

How much do boards need to know? How much is too much? At what point does the information gathering process become intrusive? At what point does the drive for standards drive the institution beyond what is appropriate?

II. The Parent Demands

Parents today are paying more than ever before for tuition for good independent schools. Many schools are still dominated by parent boards, which feel the pressure from the consumer (the parent) to justify the tuition. Parents insist on accountability, and they are achieving it.

III. Other Legitimate Measures

Some other measures to consider:

1. Attrition control
2. Exit interviews
3. Admissions trends and standards
4. Giving levels and trends
5. Volunteer levels
6. Measurement of certain skills as such as critical thinking
7. Community reputation
8. Student feedback
9. Graduate university placement and career success
10. Teacher evaluation
11. Criterion referenced tests as well as nationally standardized tests

IV. State Aid and State Controls

In some parts of the world, state, regional, provincial or national governments are planning or implementing legislation to ascertain school quality. If a school "passes" or "excels", it may receive government aid or grants. The feeding frenzy for government funds, already present in many countries in the world, will then intensify. How will independent schools fare in these plans? Already, in New Zealand, Canada and Australia independent schools receive modest to generous grants per child that have already created a dependency on government funding in these schools.

Government funding, when it pays as much as 15% or more of a child’s tuition at an independent school, is fostering dependence. The very "independence" of
independent schools is threatened if these countries, schools, boards and heads are honest about the impact, implications, rules and government intrusion that such funding represents.

Should schools be subject to evaluation based on teacher training and hiring standards? National achievement testing? Curriculum demands? Other testing requirements?

In a presentation to the New Zealand Independent Schools Conference in May, 1999, the then Minister of Education spoke to an audience to which his party was friendly. He spoke of the quality of state schools, of the Governments commitment to the state schools and how he would like to make "every independent school like a state school." There was not much of a stir in the room in response to that statement. The New Zealand participants were mostly interested in whether the state aid per pupil formula would be increased, kept the same or cut under a new government, if one were to occur in the fall 1999 elections. Such a change on government did indeed occur.

The "shadow" minister was also present at the conference and spoke as well. He is now in office. He spoke of the fact that independent schools were not his constituency, that the new Government would not support an increase in funding and would in fact, cap it. As of April 2000, that funding has been capped. All students in independent schools in New Zealand will now share in a funding formula that is a flat sum. If enrollment increases in the independent sector, the funding per child will decrease.

In New Zealand, many independent schools have "integrated," in effect become state schools and independent in name only. They receive the full public funding formula but continue to have their own boards of trustees and specific missions. For a while at least, they may also charge their past tuition, but they may not increase it. What will be their independence of action? Most schools heads with whom I have spoken indicate it will be minimal.

There are three basic questions to ask:

1. What are appropriate versus inappropriate ways in which boards, parents and the government should or should not influence INDEPENDENT schools, their policies and their ultimate educational outcomes?

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages to INDEPENDENT schools of accepting any level or ever increasing levels of government funding?

3. What kind of accountability should school heads and boards undertake that is healthy, and necessary to ensure a quality school? Should that accountability be pressed by parents and/or government or should it come from the board and the school's leadership?

The line between guidance and support from government on the one hand and intrusion on the other, is a delicate one.