

How can we make our schools better?

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A recent *Parade* magazine article delved into the burning question of school improvement by asking students and teachers across the country this simple question: “How can we make our schools better?” The responses to this query, predominantly from public schools, I doubt will come as much of a surprise. However, as I read these very reasonable suggestions from many diverse sources, I reflected on the many improvements independent schools make on a regular basis, as well as our need to continue to make everything we do better in our attempts to move from *good to great*. While none of us in independent schools feels the job is anywhere near complete, we can take solace in the fact that we have become responsive and nimble organizations, able to look at ourselves critically, and willing to make changes when we think they will serve better our students.

Essentially, we as teachers ask our students to continue learning and improving, to identify weaknesses and challenges, and to attempt to address those challenges with strategies for self-improvement. I’ve always maintained that we should do no less than we ask of our students—that is, we should constantly be addressing our challenges, inviting opinions for improvement, and engaging in dialogue with our partners in this critical endeavor (our students, parents and alumni) to ensure that we are doing the best job we can to nurture and challenge the learners in our community. As with human beings, institutions are not perfect. However, only by engaging in school-wide efforts to improve will we continue to get better as individual schools. More importantly, I am certain that we will never cease to try.

So, let’s look at a few of these notable suggestions, taken from the *Parade* magazine, and see how we have fared in the independent school world.

Suggestion #1

Fire Bad Teachers. How can someone be a horrible teacher and not get fired, just because they have taught for a long time. Most of the teachers I have had have been wonderful, but there were a couple that just didn't want to try, and we could tell.

Maybe a new way of evaluating teachers could be developed.

- Elizabeth Langkamp, 17, Downers Grove, IL.

Fire Mean Teachers. I would change the mean teachers who call their students idiots and tell them they are stupid when they make a mistake.

-Diana Casso, 16, San Antonio, TX.

Response: Elizabeth and Diana get right to the point, don't they? While simplistic, we can't ignore entirely the common sense approach they suggest. Schools should follow a thorough teacher evaluation process that proceeds throughout the year. It should begin with a self-evaluation and goal setting for the year by each faculty member. Following a meeting with an immediate supervisor to review those goals, the faculty member should be observed by his/her department head, division director, and/or a member of the senior administration. These observers should create written reports which are then incorporated into a formal written evaluation of every faculty member. These written reports should then be produced by the division directors and reviewed in person with each teacher in the spring, before contracts are issued. Parent comments commonly could be included in this written evaluation. In short, schools must design and implement a process that is comprehensive, fair, and constructive.

In addition to the self-evaluation, we also should ask our faculty, when appropriate from a grade-level perspective, to include input from their students. In the self-evaluation, each faculty member should be asked to reflect on his/her strengths in and out of the classroom, on special projects he/she has undertaken during the year and about which he/she is especially proud, and on any weaknesses or challenges that he/she would like to address in the coming year. Additionally, each faculty member should have a direct one-on-one conversation with his/her supervisor in the spring of each year, prior to the issuance of contracts. These two-way conversations should include all points raised in the evaluative narratives and the self-evaluations and would be intended to improve communication and allow for changes in or additions to narratives when appropriate. These conversations also give each faculty member an opportunity to share with his/her manager any and all input into the evaluation process and anything that can be done to improve either the school or the faculty member's work environment.

Another key part of this important effort is an aggressive nationwide recruiting effort for teachers whenever an opening occurs. As part of that process, a team of administrators (including the appropriate division director; perhaps a director of human resources; the headmaster, and perhaps an outside search firm; can work on every faculty recruitment effort. I think the following independent school administrator's response to this

suggestion sheds appropriate light on his school's attempt to upgrade constantly the level of teaching:

“Our new faculty evaluation model, designed to give teachers consistent feedback about their work in the classroom, seeks above all else to ensure that the faculty at our school continues to be the very best available. We are privileged to have teachers of the highest caliber here - dedicated, nurturing, and compassionate. Our concern, rather than worrying about getting rid of poor teachers, is in devising ways (through higher salaries, better benefits, and school growth and improvement in general) to entice our talented professionals to stay.”

Suggestion #2

Care About Each Kid's Needs. I'd make sure that every teacher had to take courses on how to deal with each child's abilities and disabilities—and how to make sure that each child is truly learning. During my whole school career, I never had a teacher who would take an interest in why some kids weren't learning, or why they were acting up or withdrawing from the other kids.

-Elizabeth A. Gast, 21, Baltimore, MD.

Response: This one covers a lot of ground, and it involves so many different areas of school keeping - from curriculum design to teacher evaluation, to standardized testing, scheduling, and counseling. Here's a helpful response from the perspective of an independent school teacher and administrator who has attempted to do just this throughout her career.

“I strongly agree that teachers should understand learning differences and be sensitive to each student's abilities and challenges. I feel very fortunate to have been taught by caring, qualified teachers throughout my educational career, to have received vision from administrative leaders who personally helped guide my pursuit of learning how to effectively teach all students, and to have been surrounded by wonderful teaching professionals for the past nineteen years. In the last five years at my school, I have worked side-by-side with teachers whose specialty is working with all sorts of different learning styles and who genuinely care about their students. The high commitment our teachers embrace allows them to always look for the very best in every student, and they are not willing to give up in any learning situation. I have seen these teachers stay with students long past the required hours and not leave the student until he/she had complete understanding of the academic skills being taught. Our teachers care enough to set high standards, to spend countless hours outside of the regular working day, including weekends and evenings, helping students and researching a new learning style or method to benefit a single student. The teachers at our school are deeply concerned about students who struggle academically, as well as students who experience problems socially and emotionally.

“In the past few years, our administrators, counselors, and teachers have made several

conscious attempts to assist any students who may be struggling academically. For example, changes have been made in the class schedule to include tutorial times.

Our learning center has sought to assist students in any way possible to ensure academic success. Examples of these initiatives include:

- a Student Support Service, which was added for homework support
- courses during the school year to teach study skills
- SAT Review sessions during the school year to prepare for the individual test dates
- a complete Summer Learning Program to address specific needs in the summer when school work is not the focus
- individual subject tutoring to address skills issues outside the classroom
- help sessions for students who are new to our community, so a smoother transition can happen from previous school experiences
- academic coaches who help students within the study periods of the Upper and Middle School schedule to gain a more effective use of time management and organization
- a Coordinate Program to assist students not quite ready to function in the mainstream college-prep experience
- one-on-one courses offered when a student is not able to learn within the confines of a typical classroom, because English is not his/her native language
- software added to the teaching areas of the learning center staff that enhances a student's ability to write and create without being held back because of a disability
- special teams of teachers are formed to study the problems of individual students and look for ways to improve what we are already accomplishing

“Our learning center is an outgrowth of these measures, instituted to identify and help students with academic difficulties and learning differences. We are now working with approximately 110 students through our Language Development program, 18 students in our Student Support Service, 25 students receiving subject tutoring (this number increases and decreases with student need and times of the school year), 125 students over the course of the school year in the individual courses offered, 50 new students receiving input as they transition into our Middle School, 9 coordinate students within the three school divisions, 11 students gaining help from academic coaches, and over 150 students receiving help over the course of each summer.

“Our administrative staff and our teachers have been wonderfully supportive as we have worked for the last three years to build these programs. Rarely a day goes by that I don't hear from one of our teachers asking for help with a particular student or asking for suggestions to present material in a different format to help their students. Classroom teachers have worked in tandem with the learning center support staff to provide testing, as well as classroom and homework accommodations for students with documented

learning differences, including Attention Deficit Disorder; to provide one-on-one tutorials; to monitor student progress weekly; and to keep parents updated with bi-weekly progress reports from the learning center staff.

“I continue to be excited and amazed by what we've accomplished in our learning center in a relatively short time. I am thankful and excited (but not surprised) by the response from parents, teachers, and students to this program. I am thrilled by the opportunities facing us as we begin to learn how to demystify students through the work of Dr. Mel Levine, because it will bring another avenue to better serve our students. Because our Parent’s Association recognized the incredible need for our teachers to be better equipped, we were able to send three strong educators to the School Attuned Conference in New York, and that led to a school-wide effort for our faculty and parents become better equipped to work with students. The following are some of the ideas we will consider, because they are prominent features of optimal educational environments:

- Teachers would be well trained in how learning works and would become knowledgeable about the specific brain functions that are critical for the age group and/or subject matter they teach.
- Teachers would have learned about the revealing signs of specific differences in learning, how to identify these in the classroom, and how to manage students with learning problems more effectively.
- Teachers would be trained to "recognize" students' strengths and special affinities (areas of strong interest), so as to make sure that these positive qualities are being recognized, celebrated, and enhanced.
- Students would be learning about learning while they are learning. They would study the different brain processes and acquire the terminology needed to think about and understand their own minds.

Suggestion #3

No More Boring Homework. In most of my classes, homework is like, “Read the chapter and answer the questions at the end.” *Boring.* I’d like to use my mind a little more. Like in history in seventh grade, we were studying caravans, and the teacher had us write a journal as if we were in a trading caravan in ancient times, traveling from city to city. A lot more interesting and challenging.

-Matthew Strauss, 14, Burbank, CA.

Response: We asked three veteran division directors in independent schools to respond to this suggestion.

A Lower School director: “When I read that a 14-year-old student finds homework boring, I can’t help but believe that Socrates alluded to having the same response from his students. When students use the word ‘boring,’ they usually push their parents’ buttons. The issue of boring homework is definitely not a new revelation. I have learned

when students use the word ‘boring,’ often they are saying, ‘I don’t like to do it or ‘I don’t want to do it.’ Many times students use ‘boring’ when actually what they mean is that it is too hard or maybe too difficult to understand. Parents often confuse their child’s use of the word ‘boring’ to mean that the student finds the work to be too easy. That very seldom is the case. Students love to do work they find easy, because they love the feeling of success. Just as we adults enjoy doing tasks or sports we can do with ease. So parents need to have their antenna up in these cases and know that students will respond to homework the same way they respond to household chores. With all that said, we as educators need to make homework relevant, and it should always reflect and reinforce what is being taught in the classroom. It is important for homework not to be just busy work. Higher level thinking should also be incorporated. Some homework will be fun, challenging and thought provoking, while other homework will be hard work. Reflect on when you had to memorize your multiplication facts. It was a lot of work and many students through the years found it to be less than fun. Homework can mirror life. Sometimes it is too hard; sometimes it is too easy. Sometimes it is fun, and other times it is not; and when you are lucky and maybe when you don’t deserve it, you’ll get a pass.”

A Middle School director: “Homework, regretfully, will rarely be complimented on its originality and verve. In fact, when I talk to our kids, I’m struck when they say an assignment wasn’t ‘too bad.’ Homework between teachers and students is similar to a labor negotiation, or so it seems. The teachers always want more time and effort, while the kids want more time for themselves and a fairly transparent level of ease. When neither side is happy, I am. In addition, homework that is repetitive, not *within* assignments but *between* assignments, is faulted most often by students as boring. Sometimes that is unavoidable, but generally our teachers mix up the types of questions they ask and the readings they give. The assignments are project-based, hands-on, traditional, and sometimes even fun.

An Upper School director: “One of the best aspects about small classes is that all of the students may be engaged in the learning process more easily. For example, it is easier to glean the material from the students themselves by asking questions in a discussion rather than by lecturing. Also, students often work in small groups, helping each other to learn information. Teachers are able to call on every student for a response, thus keeping students actively involved. These kinds of learning exchanges help students to have more control over how the homework they have completed may be used during the next day’s class. Also, Upper School teachers are always endeavoring to include a variety of learning opportunities such as projects, oral reports, labs or field trips, because the teachers recognize that students learn in a variety of ways. Although there are times when students need to learn specific facts or formulas, rote memorization of answers to particular questions is not the goal of homework. Application of knowledge and understanding the implications of these applications is the goal of learning in the Upper School.”

Suggestion #4

Don't Pack Us In. I would make this school less over-crowded—it's hard to get through the halls, stop at your locker, use the washroom and make it to class on time when the hallways are so packed.

-Robyn Martin, 17, Downers Grove, IL.

Response: All schools, but especially great schools, are in constant motion. This motion is not just the movement of the students through the buildings each day, but also their movement up through the ranks of the student body with each passing year. Philosophically, the body of knowledge, teachers' pedagogical methods, and the curriculum itself all move and evolve. As a concurrent part of this process of constant change, a school must be able to grow and adapt its educational facilities as well.

The key to meeting this demand is strong fundraising. Capital campaigns enable independent schools to add improvements to their campuses, a key factor in growing demand and retaining students and families. And, as enrollment grows, these new facilities enable schools to add more students, more courses, more teams, and more co-curricular activities, all while preserving the quality of their educational programs and protecting their student/teacher ratios.

As a consulting company, we help schools in this critical area of schoolkeeping by conducting feasibility studies which lead to capital campaigns. A number of consulting companies do this, but we believe we take our planning studies a step further. We see the planning study process as the actual beginning of any desired fundraising campaign. We schedule longer-than-average interviews with the institution's top donor prospects, engaging them in a discussion of the institution's strengths, weaknesses, vision, and plans for the future, asking them to consider gifts within a certain range. These informal discussions, documented carefully and thoroughly in a confidential memo format, lead to actual leadership gifts for the ensuing campaign, and serve as a springboard for excitement in the institutional community. And, while ultimately successful fundraising is a direct result of talented people serving students and their families effectively, we believe schools need to be aggressive, assiduous, and far-reaching in their efforts to attract the necessary resources to become the best they can be. An expansive vision, an articulation of the school's uniquenesses in its market, and an unapologetic sales-oriented fundraising process that builds upon its successes are the hallmarks of an effective development effort.

Suggestion #5

Don't Be So Stingy With Us. We don't have an auditorium. We have a "cafetorium"—a lunchroom/auditorium. The school is budget, low-budget. They really don't care about us.

-Kamal Battiste, 17, New York, NY

Response: In addition to the above-mentioned strategies, you might also want to consider getting aggressive about some alternate sources of gift income. Foundations and corporations can be a great source, provided the school works them carefully. We believe that schools should have three main objectives in its fund-raising plan for corporations and foundations:

- to develop sound proposals that articulate the case for support
- to research and identify those prospects that are most likely to support the school
- to develop long-term relationships with these funders, paving the way for renewed – and possibly more significant – grants.

Most foundations – especially the more prominent ones – receive hundreds of proposals every week, all from worthy causes and organizations that have funding needs. With the competition for the philanthropic dollar at an all-time high, schools must find ways to have their proposals noticed. One key to success with foundations or corporate boards is having an “in” – an existing relationship with someone who will work on the school’s behalf. This individual can make initial inquiries to foundation personnel or board members, paving the way for the school to submit a proposal. This way, you can rest assured that someone in the foundation office is on the lookout for your submission; your proposal will receive the special attention it deserves and will not get lost in the shuffle. In addition to making those initial inquiries, your contact may be willing to lobby foundation board members for their support of your proposal and help shepherd the proposal through the funding cycle. Without that inside track, a proposal sent from the school might be added to a stack of possibly hundreds of other grant requests – no matter how compelling your ask!

Thus, the first step is to determine what relationships are already in place. We often work closely with schools to determine which of their trustees serve on the boards of charitable foundations or corporate boards. We then ask those trustees if they think the foundation(s) would be interested in learning more about the school, and if they are willing to make phone calls on the school’s behalf, etc. We also attempt to find out what contacts the trustees have at other foundations? Often, they can have influence on other foundation boards simply by having a friend or business acquaintance involved there. Importantly, the list of contacts can grow quickly, so we often work with schools to get their development offices ready to keep track of them all. We ask trustees to think carefully of all the ties they have. And, as we get to know a school’s parent body through our school assessment studies and planning studies, we learn that they too have relationships that can benefit the school, and often our planning study interviews with new families provide a perfect time to ask for this information.

Suggestion #6

More Role Models. I would invite professional people, like lawyers and business owners, and other role models to talk to us. This would encourage kids to think about what they want to make of their lives.

-Maria Ortiz, 15, Oxnard, CA.

Response: This is a great idea, and we believe that the presence of positive role models in a child's life is critical. Above all, those of us who work in independent schools should try to lead our lives in such a way that our students can look to us and be proud to pattern their lives after what they see. Also, by having inspirational speakers visit our schools we can offer lessons in life that we hope will instill a sense of morality that will stay with our students long after they graduate from our schools. Consider adding a speaker series to your student programs, and fund it through your annual or capital campaigns. Visiting speakers can bring their own unique messages to your students, faculty, and parents. Each message can be positive, uplifting and designed to motivate and educate. Through the speakers' experiences, your communities can gain a greater appreciation of others and recognized the common messages of courage, commitment, and dedication.

Suggestion #7

Sniff Out Drugs. Drugs are easy to find in school—kids bring bags of marijuana in their jean pockets, and they don't get caught. Yes, every person has a right not to be searched without a warrant. But it would be a great idea to have a surprise search with trained dogs to sniff out every kid in school. This would take some time and patience—but it would take drugs out of our schools.

-Laurena Guizar, 15, Oxnard, CA.

Response: Unfortunately, substance abuse is one of the most prevalent problems among teens today. Alcohol and drugs are too readily available to students, and our society's views on underage consumption are often frighteningly lenient. In 1995, 17,461 Americans died as a result of alcohol and drug-related drunk driving crashes, and 5,000 were under 25, according to the National Highway Safety Administration. This problem alone costs the nation \$46 billion annually associated with lost productivity, medical costs, and property damage. In fact, more than 90% of those surveyed rated alcohol and other drugs as more threatening than crime, suicide, school dropouts, unemployment, and cigarette smoking. Of course, research confirms the critical importance of the role of parents. Numerous studies indicate that parental attitudes and practices are correlated directly to alcohol and other drug use among their children. Moreover, the nature of the interaction between parent and child has been found to be a key factor in predicting adolescents' initiation into alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use.

Consider a finding from a disturbing study—only thirty-three percent of youths, ages twelve to seventeen, consider marijuana use harmful. Furthermore, only fifty-four

percent see a serious risk using cocaine, and the number of kids who believe binge drinking is dangerous has dropped to 45%. In short, the majority of children in this country believe there is little harm in abusing drugs and alcohol, even if they themselves don't use them. Just recently a national news network ran a story about a young drug addict who sold his own four-month-old daughter for a ten dollar fix. Any substance that can enslave a person to that degree should be feared mightily, and yet many in our society still think drug and alcohol abuse is a harmless form of recreation.

Most independent schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies concerning alcohol and drug use, on and off campus. This form of discipline, coupled with sincere care for each individual student, is the schools' attempt to dissuade their students from underage drinking and drug use and to help them make smart, moral decisions.

By the way, this critical schoolkeeping issue can lead directly to effective independent school marketing. We always need to be asking ourselves "What message best resonates with our community?" and "How best do we get that message out?" We believe that marketing is a matter of maximizing information about the positive things going on in an organization, but through new digital media that can reach a wider audience. These days, the most effective way to do so is digitally.

An often unrecognized fact is that schools now must market as much to students as to their parents. Sadly, in many communities, the student makes the decision about which school to attend from as early as fourth grade. In response, many schools become gun shy and timid, unwilling to hold students to higher standards of comportment or make the tough call with regard to decisions that affect critical school culture. The real challenge is creating an environment where students are held to the highest standards – both from a character and academic point of view, but creating an environment where they are safe to say "no" to peer pressure and make counter-cultural choices. The essence of marketing, then, is pointing to the many fun and exciting parts of a school environment that dares to do all of the above, and our children are now part of a digital generation.

Author Don Tapscott, in his book *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*, points to the power of this new generation. "These 88 million children of the baby boomers in the U.S and Canada are combining demographic muscle and digital mastery to become a force for social transformation. In a nutshell, because of their access to the digital media these young people learn, work, think, shop and create differently than their parents. There is no issue more important to parents, teachers, policy makers, marketers and social activists than understanding this new generation." So, a cutting-edge, effective website (yours looks good, by the way), the expanded use of media such as DVDs and web-delivered MPEGs, and the inclusion of video training and in-house video production, can complement the more traditional admission and marketing materials to create a fuller, more enticing package. Most schools also forget the importance of marketing to prospective teachers and administrators in addition to potential paying customers, but we at Marriott Consulting believe that attractive, eye-popping school promotional videos, coupled with special features highlighting future capital and

endowment fundraising projects, can be one of the most important teacher recruitment tools a school has to offer.

Suggestion #8

Schools should provide tutoring before failure becomes a habit. And interested, prepared teachers who hold high expectations for *all* children. Also, schools should give kids competency in basic skills—reading, writing, math, thinking (problem-solving) – before the third grade or age ten. Plus exposure to all of the arts.

-Dr. Lorraine Monroe, New York, NY

Response: Independent schools have long prided themselves in the individual attention they provide to their students, and a quick walk through the halls of most independent schools quickly reminds anyone who peeks into classroom doors of the work their teachers do with individual students outside of their regular class time. Additionally, we believe that schools should consider adding a learning center, which can allow them a unique opportunity to provide support to students who, for any number of reasons, struggle with parts of their rigorous, college-preparatory curriculums.

In the words of an admission director at one such school:

“As I prepare for each visit with a prospective family, I remind myself that during their visit we will discuss educational opportunities for the most important people in the world--their children. Without exception, each parent expresses a profound interest in enrolling their children in a school which offers the smallest possible class sizes. In fact, studies show that the primary reason families choose independent schools is for the small class size. Our classes, which are taught by caring, committed teachers who are constantly looking for ways to meet the needs of each student, provide an exceptional environment in which to learn and grow. Seeing teachers working with students individually or in groups of two or three is quite typical at our school. But I also enjoy seeing the same teachers who work in the classroom with the children, attending the students' musical performances, dramatic productions, and any number of athletic activities. Our teachers are involved in more than a child's education; they become involved in their lives. When I show families through the school, whether it's early in the morning or after school, visitors frequently comment on how engaged our students seem in their activities--how much fun they seem to be having at school! Isn't that exactly what we want?"

Suggestion #9

Parents should be treated as partners in their children's education and told, and perhaps trained in, what they should do at home to help the school help their children be successful in school and in life.

-Dr. Lorraine Monroe, New York, NY

Response: We often refer to this sacred relationship between home and school as a partnership; and now, more than ever, this trust is a necessary and critical element in our

children's education, particularly now that demands on our students are increasingly complex. The energies that home and school collaboratively furnish will provide our students with the tools necessary for success. Furthermore, it is this symbiotic connection that sets for our children an example of cooperative spirit and support, a connection that, when properly nourished, helps build solid character and lasts a lifetime. Consider the words of an independent school kindergarten teacher who has worked in her school for twenty-five years. She says:

“We realize and appreciate the role parents play in the educational process of their children. It has been my experience that teachers work closely with parents, always stressing the importance of focusing on the child and his/her needs. Nothing that we parents and teachers do is more significant than doing what is best for each child. We have an open-door policy, and there is a standing invitation for parents to share their ideas and/or concerns. Although we classroom teachers have two formal conferences every year with each student's parents, the parents know a conference can be scheduled with their child's teacher(s) at any time. It is easy for teachers and parents to stay in touch—through phone calls, email messages, or having personal conversations. We invite parents of our Pre-K and Kindergarten students to observe their children through viewing windows that were installed in our new early childhood building. Every day I see at least one parent taking advantage of this opportunity. We also see parents at school very often because of the numerous volunteer opportunities our school provides.”

“It is easy for me to see, as a kindergarten teacher, that our parents place a high priority on education. They send their children to us as early as Pre-K and Kindergarten, with a respectful attitude toward their teachers. Before our students enter school, they have already been told by their parents to ‘be sure to do what the teacher says.’ This support helps set the stage for a wonderful classroom environment where learning can readily take place. I have always felt a tremendous amount of trust and support from the parents of the children I have taught here. Many teachers are thinking about retirement after teaching as long as I have (thirty-one years, altogether); however, I am not. I am convinced that I have the best kindergarten teaching job in the world. The relationship that exists at our school between parents and teachers is a major reason for that conviction.”

Suggestion #10

Stop the Favoritism. I'd make sure that everybody was treated equally. At my high school, if you were popular or rich, you could get away with just about anything.

-Juli Hutchens, 18, East Bend, NC

Response: I guess the question of fair treatment has reared its head at some point in the course of every school year since I began my teaching career. A student breaks a rule and is punished. An accusation is made that student X has done much worse. And so it goes. Administrators become inured to the unfortunate accusations that some students are targets, some are scapegoats, and some enjoy an unfair immunity from punishment because they are well connected. I do not know of a single school administrator who has not been accused of favoritism or unfair treatment at some point in his/her career. I have come to think of it as an occupational hazard. Our best response is that consistency is critical, and our administrators and faculty always attempt to be consistent yet fair in every disciplinary response and proactive policy.

I suppose the thing that concerns me the most about any such claims is that they are usually raised by a student or, sadly, by his/her parents, when the student is about to be punished for breaking a rule. We rarely have a student or parent deny flatly that the child is guilty or that, in the abstract, the punishment for such and such a transgression is unfair. The argument usually runs something like, "I know I'm guilty, but I don't think this is fair because X, Y, and Z did so much worse; they just didn't get caught." Those of us who have devoted our lives to teaching and working with kids believe that when we can begin to focus more on personal responsibility and accountability and less on whether student X got or did not get what he had coming, we will have moved in a direction that will be positive for everyone. Consider the thoughts of one independent school administrator, which I find to be particularly transparent, positive, and successful:

"Every aspect of the system that we use for behavioral expectations and disciplinary consequences for breeches of those expectations has been set up with consistency in mind. From our Middle and Upper School point systems for minor infractions to our honor code and student-led Judicial Board, we strive to emphasize personal accountability, fairness, and firmness. Consequences are always meted out with an eye on what has been done in the past and with regards to what we would like to do in the future. Another factor that leads to consistency and fairness is the team approach that we use for the disciplinary situations that do arise. No major disciplinary decision is ever made without seeking the wisdom of some group, be it the Judicial Board, the administrative team or some other experienced and informed collection of people. Children will always bristle at rules and punishments as they test the boundaries of their youth. However, they also seek out situations where these boundaries exist. In their school life as well as their home life, there is great comfort for them in knowing the parameters within which they will be expected to live. The best situation for the student is when those two settings merge and a true team effort occurs."

Suggestion #11

Don't Bump and Walk Away. I would like to see more respect and simple common courtesy in my school. For example, if you knock into someone in the hall, you should say, "I'm sorry."

-Kristen Zufan, 17, Westmont, IL.

Response: Respect for each other and the school environment is often the hallmark of schools that grow. Most independent school students are innately respectful, but we as schools simply needed to enunciate the rules a little more clearly. However, good schools talk about these issues on a regular basis, and should continue to do so.

Common courtesy is a value that is communicated through expectation and modeling. Strong schools also spend time exploring the issues of tolerance, acceptance, patience, compassion, and respect as they relate to the rights and needs of other individuals. As a result, we anticipate increased sensitivity and awareness of our personal responsibility in making our school environments even more pleasant for everyone. Here are the words of an independent school librarian who has worked at her school for thirty years:

“As a faculty member, I have experienced the growth of the campus tradition of respecting persons and respecting our environment. In recent years students and faculty have become active in demonstrating this respect--whether it is cheerfully greeting visitors, showing concern for individuals in need, personally picking up trash, or institutionally observing clean-up "revitalizing" days. A community ethos is emerging that affirms each other's successes and encourages each other to be the best he or she can be. The research for the *Good to Great* model indicates that great leaders show personal humility while building social structures that will endure. The attitudes of our community help produce such leaders.”

Suggestion #12

“I Want a Future.” My school is an alternative school. People who don’t do well in any other school go here. They don’t push you to do well. A lot of kids graduate just by sliding. Here, they focus on your getting out of high school, and that’s it. But I don’t want to just slide by. I want a future.

-Shaunte Styles, 18, New York, NY

Response: As college preparatory schools, our missions may seem all too clear to most: provide students the opportunity to go to the college of their choice. While college entrance is an important part of our mission, it is in fact far more detailed than that. As educational institutions concerned with the development of the whole student, it is imperative that our teachers get to know every child with whom they come in contact. Whether in the classroom, the arts arena, or on the athletic field, independent schools are all about human contact. The special relationships that exist among our faculty, students, and parents are perhaps more important to the success of our graduates than the wealth of knowledge they gather while at our schools. As we look back on our own educations, it is easy for us to see that it was the encouragement of family, friends, teachers, and parents that really made us what we are today.

Unfortunately for Shaunte and many others, the supportive relationships that are lacking in her life leave her feeling less than hopeful about her future. Shaunte has taken the first step toward achieving her future goals, however. She realizes that there is something better out there for her. Schools across the country face the difficult task of finding that delicate balance between pushing students too hard and not pushing them at all to be their very best. For students who have the innate drive to achieve, success will come most likely no matter what happens along the way. Fortunately, in most independent schools, our students face every challenge knowing that there are people at the school who want them to succeed. Here are some words of wisdom from an independent school college counselor:

“Our students are competitors in the college admissions arena. Not only are they academically prepared as a result of a challenging Upper School curriculum, but because of the close relationships formed between teacher and learner in our classrooms, our graduates seek similar connections with professors on college campuses. I am reminded of a story shared by a recent graduate who attended a large, state university and found himself in an Introductory Chemistry class with three hundred other students. Apparently after the first week of class, this young man was relating on a first name basis with the professor, because he made a point to stay and chat after class, as he had always done with his teachers at our

school. As a result of engaging the academic and extracurricular opportunities available at our school, the students are prepared to be actively involved members of the college communities they eventually join. Our students are not passive; we have empowered them to control their future. They have experienced the best educational environment any secondary school could offer, and they expect nothing less of the college experience.”

Suggestion #13

Let Us Work Together. I’d like to see more classwork done in groups. Some people don’t work so well alone. If I’m having trouble with a problem, maybe one of the other kids could explain it to me, and we could work it out together.

-Daniel Clutter, 18, Wallace, W.VA

Response: Cooperative learning is nothing new to the teachers and students in independent schools. It is not unusual to stroll down our hallways and see peer editing, group projects, study partners, and discussion groups in all grade levels. Peers teaching peers is a helpful part of the learning process, and we advocate the use of teaching strategies that include cooperative learning activities not only because it is a helpful teaching tool, but also for the enhancement of our children’s social skills, study habits, self-esteem, and sense of community. Our teachers are not only encouraged to be innovative in their teaching approaches, they are expected to be so. Given the literally millions of different types of learning styles that exist, it is not only ineffective but also unfair to teach to only one or two of them. Much of our teachers’ talents lie in their abilities to educate so many different types of minds. Our schools should rank among the very best schools at providing opportunities for students to succeed. Regardless of their strengths, weaknesses or various learning styles, every student has a right to succeed, and our schools must provide as many different settings as possible for them to do just that.

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If nothing else, these voices from across the country should make us feel very good about the state of our school and the educational environment our children enjoy. Also, I hope we get a feel for just how much we are doing to continue to improve each day. Our schools must continue those improvements and to look critically at everything we do, asking the question, “How can we make our schools better?”