

The Public Purpose of Private Schools

By Albert M. Adams

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Independent schools are uniquely positioned to make a difference in the public domain. Given the societal turf independent schools occupy, the considerable resources they command, and the powerful network of caring and influential people they attract, independent schools have the opportunity—and, I believe, the obligation—to do more than educate 1.5 percent of our nation’s children exceptionally well.

As Steve Davenport, a longtime school consultant, says, “Relatively speaking, independent schools are like beautifully-machined cars. What is preventing us from driving those powerful machines through the schoolyard gate and into the real world?” Howard Wexler, an independent school trustee for more than 20 years and creator of the Public Purpose Committee at my school, Lick-Wilmerding High School (CA), puts it another way. “Given the enormous needs of the public school systems,” he says, “how can we justify all of the talent and resources that are concentrated in independent schools continuing to be lavished on such a small number of students?” I also believe that, in the coming decade, independent schools can anticipate growing public scrutiny and possible opposition if they fail to engage the school community in the greater public good.

It’s this sort of thinking that drove the board at my school to include in the school’s new strategic plan ambitious goals for providing need-blind access to families from all walks of life and for

building a genuinely inclusive community. The board has given me a mandate to devote up to 20 percent of my time, as Lick’s head, to public purpose initiatives.

Historically, independent schools have justified their existence by citing the number of students by which they reduce the public school rolls and by noting the disproportionate number of society’s leaders and the high percentage of solid citizens whom they produce.

Independent schools first began to push their own public purpose limits by becoming accessible to previously underrepresented families. In more recent years, the proliferation of community service programs has, the schools hope, buttressed independent schools’ *raison d’être* in the eyes of the public.

As Arthur Powell chronicled in *Lessons of Privilege*, independent schools, at their best, can be viewed as “lab schools” that provide new insights into school organization and teaching and learning for the benefit of our public school colleagues. While I have been motivated by this rationale for three decades, I must reluctantly acknowledge that I have, in reality, witnessed little such transfer of knowledge.

Most public school teachers and administrators I know simply have great difficulty equating the educational world they live in with the enviable circumstances of independent schools — small scale, motivated students who have chosen to attend, engaged parents,

exceptional teaching conditions, more-than-ample funding and trustees who view themselves as supporters of the school head (as opposed to the adversarial school boards found in many public school systems). They also believe, quite rightly, that independent schools have much to learn from them, beginning with how to serve truly diverse populations of students and how to teach to the full range of learning styles and learning differences.

Making the World a Better Place: A Progressive Notion

This public purpose commitment I propose derives, first, from the progressive notion that human beings have both the desire and the capacity to make the world a better place. Similarly, schools should be viewed as transforming institutions that measure their success, in large part, by the extent to which their graduates contribute positively to their world. One reason, then, for a school to develop public purpose initiatives is to provide the opportunity for students to participate. Another is that institutional modeling can have an enduring impact on their graduates' life choices, including their life's work and their adult volunteer and philanthropic decisions. Not only, schools hope, will their students remember the public contributions made by individual adults they knew while growing up, but they will also remember that their school embraced public service as an integral part of its mission.

The Enlightened Self-Interest Lens

By making the commitment to substantial public purpose work because it is the right thing to do, independent schools also reap what I like to call "enlightened self-interest" rewards. First

among these is related to the fact that independent schools exist at the will of the public. A particular school's public image in its region and independent schools' public profile, in general, directly affect voters' and legislators' willingness to continue to confer tax-free status on their institutions. Similarly, the public's perception of independent schools also determines the extent to which they will be allowed to continue to be truly independent, being subjected to minimal governmental intrusion.

Also beneath this "enlightened self-interest" umbrella, high profile public service enterprises do enhance a school's likelihood of success with prospective funders and with municipal officials, from planning boards to health officers. A case in point occurred recently when my school was applying for a conditional use permit. When one of the planning commissioners proposed an additional \$60,000 fee, he was successfully challenged by another commissioner whose granddaughter had participated in Aim High at L-W. She said, essentially, "How can you consider taking additional money out of the budget of this school that is doing so much to benefit our community? It needs those resources to serve our children!"

Further, public service programs attract new friends to the school. For instance, my school has created advisory boards for Aim High and the Bay Area Teachers Center (another program housed on campus), bringing a number of influential community members into the Lick-Wilmerding sphere. While their particular interest resides with the program they are directly serving, they have also become friends of Lick-Wilmerding. Similarly, a number of new

Lick-Wilmerding trustees have joined our board, in part, because of the public purpose work we are doing. The school considers the work so important, it has included dedication to public purpose as one of the three pillars (Exemplary Education, Access and Inclusive Community, Public Purpose) of its new strategic plan.

“Public Purpose” is introduced in this way:

A fundamental element of a Lick-Wilmerding education is a commitment to strong moral and ethical values and to the public good. Given its unique position in San Francisco’s history, Lick-Wilmerding views itself as a private school with public purpose. Regular involvement in, and contribution to, the larger community and the San Francisco educational arena enhance the lives of students and teachers.

Independent schools, by virtue of their non-taxable status, operate at the pleasure of the public. They, therefore, have both the opportunity and the obligation to develop models that contribute to the improvement of American education and to extend the use of their insights, energy, and resources beyond their campus walls.

To ensure the implementation of this vision the school created a standing Public Purpose Committee of trustees to help determine which prospective programs to initiate. Toward that end, we devised a detailed set of criteria, or “filters,” to guide our program decisions:

1. *Focus on the educational arena.* Since education is the field we know best, we primarily focus our

- public purpose energies on teaching, learning, educational delivery services and related areas.
2. *Involve Lick-Wilmerding students in every way possible.* Student involvement in public purpose projects, beyond the school’s robust community service program, is highly desirable as a further extension of the school’s mission.
3. *Ensure judicious use of resources.* Except for the head’s time, “seed” grants, and modest amounts of ongoing financial support from the school’s budget, our public purpose projects are designed to be self-sustaining.
4. *Serve public schools and low income populations.* Given the current challenges facing California’s public schools and the increasing gulf separating the “haves” from the “have nots,” these are simply the areas where the need for assistance is greatest.
5. *Collaborate, where possible, with the San Francisco Unified School District and other appropriate public and/or nonprofit organizations.* “Partnership” is our public purpose mantra; the more collaboration, the more synergy; the more synergy, the more powerful and expansive the outcomes. Our purpose is to marshal the larger community’s resources in the most effective ways possible, not to be proprietary or to blow our own horn.
6. *Select initiatives that will affect substantial numbers of people.* While quality, flexibility, responsiveness and leanness come first, “going to scale” is also

important—both to maximize the number of people we serve and to make our programs attractive to others who might replicate them.

7. *Design programs as potentially replicable models.* To borrow President Bush's phrase, we view ourselves as one of "a thousand points of light." Our hope is that all independent schools and other non-public schools will develop more extensive public purpose programs in the years ahead.

These filters have been very useful in keeping us focused on our strengths, our resources and our priorities as they have, necessarily, guided us away from as many projects as they have recommended. Our energies are currently devoted to three major initiatives, in addition to the school's extensive, voluntary community service program: Aim High, the Bay Area Teachers Center, Bridging the Divide.

Cautions and Suggestions

At this early stage of our public purpose journey, we have learned to temper our enthusiasm with several cautions. A partial list of these caveats includes:

- The school's board of trustees must not only embrace, but also take the lead in, promoting a public purpose agenda.
- Beware of your reach exceeding your grasp; recognize that you cannot do it all; commit to quality rather than quantity; build a solid base for each program before attempting to grow.
- Stay humble and remember that public purpose is as much about learning as it is about sharing or doing.

- Partnerships for the public good, rather than competition, is the goal. There is plenty of public need to go around.
- Do periodic "reality checks" regarding what is on your school head's plate. Help the head to be realistic about what is "doable" and sustainable.
- Build sustainable structures; examples of large promises and meager follow-through are legion in public service enterprises.
- Embark on programs that link with the school's larger philosophy and identity.
- Embed the school's public purpose commitment in its strategic plan and its budget.
- Hire first-rate directors for each public purpose program, and support them well.
- Design organizational systems for administration, governance and support that can absorb leadership transitions and outlive the programs' founders.
- While every school has the potential to reach into the public purpose realm to some degree, those that are best positioned to undertake major initiatives share the following qualities:
 - The school is stable, adequately financed, running well and can therefore support such new initiatives.
 - Public purpose is explicitly embedded in the school's mission.
 - A first-rate administrative team and an effective administrative structure free the school head to focus much of his/her time on large projects such as capital

campaigns, strategic planning, board-building and public purpose initiatives (such a flattened administrative structure has the added virtue of increasing the likelihood of a smooth internal transition when the head leaves).

- The board organization and meeting structure are streamlined to demand only a reasonable amount of the head's time for the care and feeding of the board.
- The head is comfortable with delegation of major responsibilities, thus enabling him or her to confer leadership authority for major internal school decisions, and for each public purpose initiative, on a capable leader.

Enlarging a Headship

An additional, serendipitous by-product of a school's public purpose orientation is that it provides unique opportunities to energize a senior head and to capitalize on his/her extensive knowledge and networks. An independent school benefits enormously from the continuity and the leadership of a long-term head, assuming that he or she remains vital and leads the way in building a learning community characterized by inquiry, reflection and growth.

During what I view as the third stage of a headship (Stage I, 1–5 years = Systems-Building and Integration; Stage II, 6–10 years = Hitting Stride and Reaping Rewards; Stage III, 11+ years = Expanded Vision), a school head is often well-positioned and eager to expand the reach of the school beyond its walls. In

most cases this stage of a headship coincides with a school running smoothly, a board functioning at the top of its game, stable enrollment and a solid financial picture. When this is the case, many a head begins to wonder, "What more is there to do?" In most instances, those heads have also arrived at a developmental stage in their own lives where their primary professional desire is to make a difference and to leave their mark. Support for leading the expansion of the school's public purpose vision can be just the challenge such a head yearns for, at the same time that it matches the developmental readiness of the institution.

Public Purpose Is for Every School

While I describe how public purpose initiatives can be designed and implemented in nearly ideal circumstances, I want to underscore that a meaningful commitment to public purpose is possible in every independent school, even if human and fiscal resources allow for only modest programs and/or if the head is at an early stage of his or her career. Whether on a small or grand scale, the opportunities for independent schools to make a difference beyond their walls are compelling and ever-present. The resulting payoff for the larger community, and for the school, is simply a function of institutional will, clear vision and thoughtful planning. It is my fervent hope that school heads and trustees across the country will embrace public purpose as integral, rather than peripheral, to their missions and will step forward as dynamic leaders in making each of their schools a brilliant public purpose "point of light."

Al Adams has been head of Lick-Wilmerding High School (CA) for the past 12 years.