

Sabbaticals: A Good Idea and a Sound Investment

By Albert M. Adams

[From *Independent School*, Fall 1998]

One hundred and eighty days of respite after 12 years of the daily rigors of heading independent schools. Ah, sabbatical! In my case, “sabbatical” was not defined in professional terms—as a time to produce. Instead, it was informed by the biblical interpretation as a time “to lay fallow.” And this, I believe, is how it should be.

My wife, Susan (who spent a quarter century teaching foreign languages and deaning in independent schools), and I had dreamed for years of living abroad with our two boys before they were too old to want to share such an experience with us. As it happened, we squeaked in under the chronological wire with Charley at 15 and Willie at 13. For one semester they were in school—at the American International School on the Cote d’Azur—and, for the first time since kindergarten, Susan and I were not.

This has been the experience of a lifetime for each of us, and for us as a family. It has been a cross between a vacation and a new and different kind of life. Living amongst the French in an apartment overlooking Nice and the Mediterranean, we have grown accustomed to French wine, bread and cheese (the only bargains to be found in France) and have luxuriated in the joys offered by la Promenade des Anglais, the pebble beaches, the red rock Esterel falling into the sea, the rivers, the skiing, the multitudinous museums, the homes of Matisse, Renoir and Van Gogh, the glories of Provence and of Italy.

But most meaningful and memorable have been the pace of our lives and the quality of our family time. These have been the greatest gifts of sabbatical. One could argue that they would have come just as tidily wrapped in Santa Fe or Jackson Hole or Durango. But for us, they became reality in Nice, and we return home to San Francisco feeling more in touch with the central elements of life, and with one another, than ever before. We return with more of a sense of balance, of proportion, of well-being, than we have felt in a long time. As you read this, I’m sure some of you are saying, “All well and good for you and your family, but what of the cost to your school? How can a school justify letting its head go away for half a year? Isn’t this an excessive luxury?”

It’s true that it is not yet customary for school heads to receive sabbatical leave, although the practice is becoming more common. I believe, however, that the idea of a school head taking sabbatical should be viewed as more than a rare gift for a job well done, a thinly veiled form of restitution or graceful exit at the end of a long tenure. To the contrary, providing a sabbatical in the head’s contract can be good business and enlightened strategic planning for a school, as well as sound modeling for students and the school community.

My reasoning is as follows:

- An independent school is never more at risk, from a leadership and relational standpoint, than when it changes heads. Continuity of a school’s vision and of a head’s relationships with faculty, board and other key constituencies (including

major donors) are among potential casualties. If a school is fortunate enough to have an effective head, a half-year sabbatical may well mean the difference between burn-out and an additional productive chapter of that person's leadership.

- Beyond the potential dislocations which can accompany the change of head, such a transition is also very expensive. The search for a new head, itself, can easily surpass \$60,000. In addition, incoming heads often command higher salaries and more extensive benefits than sitting heads. One also needs to consider the extensive drain on human resources— both paid and volunteer—required of a thorough head search.
- The board's decision at the time of a head's appointment, to provide a sabbatical after seven-to-ten years of successful leadership, is a reassuring symbol of the school's commitment to stability. The message is two-pronged: that the board is convinced that it has attracted the right head for the long term and that the entering head does not view his or her new school as a steppingstone to another position.
- The corollary to providing a sabbatical is a commitment to serious evaluation of a head's performance in the years leading up to the sabbatical. This is the very time when, absent an effective evaluation process, when a "just good enough" head can become entrenched, to the long-term detriment of the school. A sabbatical is a major investment, and board members are likely to extend such a benefit only to a head with whom it is very pleased. A sabbatical on the horizon keeps the issue of serious evaluation on the table. For instance, I have a two-year roll-over contract, with an annual evaluation. Thus, the board could have informed me after year five that I would be terminated after year six, obviating a sabbatical during year seven. I am also formally committed to remaining as head of my school for a minimum of two more years following my sabbatical.
- Unlike those sources of conventional wisdom who assert that head turnover every eight-to-ten years is healthy, and even necessary, I subscribe to Peter Senge's conception of a learning community, as outlined in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*. His premise is that every person in an organization, beginning with the CEO, needs to be committed to ongoing personal and institutional inquiry, reflection, and growth. A successful school head, then, should strive to develop such a learning community, including attending to his or her own continuous regeneration in conjunction with the school's evolution.
- Another aspect of the learning community is the deliberate sharing of authority and responsibility. The simplistic conception of "school head as super-hero," with its attendant corollary of a quick fix (replacement) when he or she fails, is unrealistic for any mortal school head. It is also a formula for institutional weakness as other members of the community become dependent, and even dysfunctional, in a top-down, paternalistic environment—at the same time that the head is set up for burn-out or failure. An effective head is one who leads through

empowering those around him or her, thus assuring the enduring quality of the organization—including in his or her absence.

A well-timed head's sabbatical can foster proactive empowerment in several important ways:

- In some instances a school head finds him or herself playing too much of a leadership role for the board. A six-month head's absence can provide an opportunity for a board to find a new footing—particularly in terms of leadership with the board.
- The head's sabbatical period can be an extraordinary opportunity for various administrators and teachers -- especially an assistant head who aspires to a future headship—to try on new hats. In my case, I was blessed with an exceptionally competent team of administrators which not only viewed a six-month job change as an attractive and safe opportunity, but which will serve the school in new ways in years to come. In addition to carefully building this team during my first six years, we have also used the services of an organizational consultant over the past three years to help us anticipate transitional issues. This included a two-day, off campus retreat a few weeks before my departure.
- The six-month redefinition of roles also makes it possible for the returning head and board of trustees to fashion a significant change in the head's job description upon his or her return. For instance, a school entering a major capital campaign, a strategic planning phase or an extensive alumni/ae cultivation program might want the returning head to shoulder more of these responsibilities while the sabbatical semester's "acting head" continues with many internal head's duties. In some cases, the timing will be right for the creation of a formal associate head position.
- Whether or not formally defined, the head's return offers a rare reentry opportunity. Just as a wise new head employs an entry plan—positioned in equal parts as anthropologist, consultant and proactive leader—so can a returning sabbatical head seize the moment to focus the community's attention on the school's central themes, directions and needs. There is a brief window of opportunity when he or she can serve as an objective mirror and sounding board for the community before being caught up again in the daily work of the school.
- Students learn more from our actions than from our words. A head's sabbatical conveys many important messages to them and to the adults in the school community. Among these are that hard work and devotion to an institution should be rewarded and that even a school head must balance his or her commitment to the school with attention to his or her health, family relationships and need to learn and to grow. When I spoke at my final assembly about my plan to "lie fallow" and to repay my family for some of my absence over the past 12 years, you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. In our students' world of workaholic parents and ever-spiraling pressure to achieve and to acquire, this

message about the importance of balance and proportion in one's life is, I believe, essential. (It needs to be said here that before a school can implement a head's sabbatical, there ideally should be a faculty sabbatical policy in place—and that the head's sabbatical must be separate from, and additional to, those available to the faculty.)

I am pleased, but not surprised, to say that I returned to my school to find it even stronger than when I had left. My assistant head was superb in his role as acting head. And the rest of the administration team was equally stellar. As implied, I have indeed returned to a different job description—which was carefully designed in conjunction with my sabbatical leave. Among other things, it allowed me to attend to a major capital campaign and the year-long revision of the school's strategic plan. The results of this planning will determine the scope of my job for the next five years, with expansion of public purpose initiatives, more extensive interaction with alumni/ae and further enrichment of the school's program being major pieces of the puzzle. This is an important benchmark in the school's evolution, and I return from sabbatical renewed and energized as we enter this compelling chapter. We have arrived at this point more by design than by chance, and sabbatical has been one of the many ingredients.

I strongly urge boards of trustees across the country to consider implementing a head's sabbatical for the health of the head, but also for the health of the school.