# School Burial Grounds: What You Don't Know Will Come Back to Haunt You

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Every independent school is a cottage industry. It is distinctive. Its birth and maturation, its myths and stories, its heroines and heroes, its life path, its core values, its heart and soul are unique. A school's *raison d'etre* is shaped by the culture that embodies its shared values and common purpose. School cultures are products of their times as well as their histories and underlying beliefs. The most predictable abrasion created by institutional change finds it roots in the conscious or unconscious fear that core values will be lost, even in the face of apparent growth and improvement. The great challenge facing all of us who lead and are part of school communities is to make peace between foundational principles and changing needs and expectations.

Change is a given. Adaptation is optional. Inclusion and participation in the change process are essential. Yet, even with the best of intentions, focused preparation and thoughtful dialogue, some changes are, at best, ineffective, and, at worst, damaging. Others occur by chance rather than by design and may appear in the form of disorienting crises.

Whether the context is one of proactive planning or reactive crisis resolution, it is critical that school leaders understand the daunting significance of what we term "school burial grounds."

Most school leaders understand their ability to have an impact on a school's current culture through shifts in polices, procedures, or pedagogy. What is not readily apparent, however, is the deeper and more enduring influence of history and culture in the day-to-day life and decisions made across a school community. "School burial grounds" (we'll use the initials "SBG" for simplicity's sake) is our way of describing these historical and cultural strands. Whether ghosts or angels, shadows or beacons, skeletons or heroes, their power is present and real, and they can seldom be ignored or denied for long without consequences.

Real-life examples include:

- A new head is hired to "turn the school around." Three years later she is locked in mortal combat with old guard faculty and resigns amidst board criticism of her leadership style.

- The school's new technology center is featured in Architectural Digest, the old campus is elegantly renovated and alumni contributions decline.

- A new dean of students is hired from a sister school. She finds that implementing the smallest procedural change is "like pulling teeth" and undergoes a personal and professional crisis after her first year.

- A nationally recognized head moves from the East Coast to the Midwest to take up the reins from the 20-year head of a prestigious school. His

predecessor moves into retirement nearby. Inexplicably, the new head fails to hit his stride in the new setting and leaves in disgrace after his second year.

Edgar Schein, in *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, suggests how difficult it is to define "culture," but how apparent it becomes when we try to change it. His working definition includes three components:
- espoused values and vision;
- artifacts and traditions;
- unconscious norms and beliefs.

We would add that another component of culture is what is conscious—yet unspoken or long forgotten. Here are the skeletons and secrets that are hidden, often from generation to generation, that are palpable and present in the daily workings of the school, yet remain unnamed by few and unknown by many. It is important to recognize these elements of SBG in addition to the other components of culture.

Schools need a clearly articulated common mission to define who and what they are in relation to the rest of the world. Their artifacts and traditions serve as symbols that embody and encourage enduring core values. The unconscious norms and beliefs reflect prevalent attitudes and assumptions about procedures and behaviors that are constantly at play, above or below the surface, as decisions are being made. These elements of culture are very much alive in the present, even as they draw nourishment through their roots extending backward across time.

SBG is the backdrop to all that presents itself, or is brought forth, on the school's stage. Our collaboration in writing this article, as a practitioner (school head) and systems consultant who live at the intersection of theory and practice, represents the relevance and the raw power of SBG. Al's decision to work with an organizational consultant throughout his 14 years as a school head derives from his observation that "insiders," including the head, can expect to see, or to have revealed to them, only partial truths. Anthropological antennae are both sensitized and lengthened by the presence of a skilled outsider, an objective practitioner whose role is to help community members articulate and appreciate the true feelings and convictions that shape individuals' behaviors and positions. Debbie's particular systems focus recognizes the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future in understanding and addressing all that occurs in a school community.

School burial grounds are brought to life most vividly through what Terrence Deal and Lee Bolman first identified in 1984, in *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations*, as the symbolism of community rituals and ceremonies, which, at times by chance and at times by design, are instrumental in marking change and transitions. Such moments in a community's life illuminate, dignify, and draw sustenance from the past, while simultaneously turning attention to the future. By invoking core values and shared identity, they bring hope and renewal to the community of the present. Whether grand or modest, events such as graduations, reunions, founder's days, orientations, retirements and "moving up" days contribute in important ways to

the health of a school culture and its prospects for thriving in the future. They represent special opportunities to recognize and honor the influences on the school across time, thereby reassuring a sense of continuity and connection.

Too often, however, attention to SBG is relegated only to such symbolic moments. SBG also influence the daily life of a school community, its thoughts, discussions and choices, moods and passions, whether or not they are known or acknowledged by school leaders and other players on stage. Once acknowledged, the power of SBG can be channeled by consciously maintaining values and beliefs that serve us, and by explicitly challenging those which diminish or subvert our efforts.

**School Burial Grounds Queries**
A sophisticated understanding of the forces that create the SBG will result in transforming how your school does business. We have developed a simple, straightforward technique for bringing your particular school's burial grounds to the surface. The first step is to assess the SBG's impact on current circumstances; the second is to determine the extent to which the values inherent in the SBG and in the current culture align with your own.

The following sequential queries have proved useful in identifying SBG issues and their relevance:
- What is the mission of your school? Is it clearly articulated and broadly shared?
- What goals and objectives have been identified as top priorities for the next three years?

- How do your personal convictions and the community's current needs and desires relate to one another and to these goals?
- How congruent are these goals with their SBG antecedents?
- How great are the disparities between what Chris Argryis, in *Organizational Learning*, has called your school's "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use" (stated aspirations vs. reality)?
- What lessons can be learned from your school culture's historical response to change in general?
- What about your school's response to change related to the specific issues with which you are wrestling?
- Whose are the most influential voices, and who perceive themselves as having the most at stake, regarding the directions you propose?
- Are these voices, these stakeholders, currently inside or outside your tent?
- Whose job (role) did you inherit? Why did your predecessor leave? Is the position newly established? If so, why?

**The Head Search and Beyond**
All exits and entrances in the school system are reflective of the school burial grounds' intersection with current realities. There is always a correlation, not always conscious, between the choices one makes in work and personal, cultural life stories. It is no coincidence that each member of your school has chosen this place and time to be part of this community within this role. The more aware people are of personal motivations and choices, the more capacity they will have to be effective and satisfied in their work. The more understanding they have in terms of the

parallels between their "personal" and "professional" choices, the more aligned they will be with the vision and direction of the school itself. This theory applies across lifetime stages, and brings awareness to what the culture needs to be and do to contribute to each individual's success.

Nowhere is this more revealing—nor are schools more vulnerable—than in the search for a new school head. If the match is good, the school will thrive; if not, considerable suffering is assured. The question, of course, is how is the notion of "a good match" defined? Unfortunately, most head searches proceed with a minimum of institutional introspection. In short order, eager to start down the head search trail, search committees declare that they know what the school needs in its new head. Generally, this is followed by a list of attributes that describe the likes of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed or Confucius —on a good day. A serious, dispassionate and comprehensive understanding of a school's history and culture (its SBG) is essential to inform the hiring of a new head and to guide his/her effective leadership of the school. Similarly, the successful head candidate will divine the essential elements of this history and culture during the search process and will rigorously assess the quality of the match between his/her own values and the prevailing ethos of the school.

Just as historian E.H. Carr asked in *What Is History?*—"Does history make the man, or the man history?"—we propose that a school's history and culture select and shape the school head as much as he or she selects and shapes the school. There is an intricate dynamic at work

during a head search, generally invisible, unconscious, and unspoken, between the life path of the school and that of the successful candidate. Because the school head is viewed as the embodiment of both a school's accumulated essence and its future vision, there is a great deal at stake when a head search occurs. Ultimately, the school calls forth a particular kind of head, who in turn seeks a particular kind of school. The more self-knowledge both the institution and the candidate have in terms of core values, mission, and current realities, the more the match will be successful.

Unless the school's leadership, beginning with the head but including the board, administration, and faculty, shares a profound understanding of, and appreciation for, the distinctiveness of that history and culture, the road ahead will surely be bumpy.

**A School Burial Grounds Exercise**
We have developed an approach to SBG which school leaders report to be useful. Framed within the context of "systems thinking," that is, viewing a school community holistically, with all of its intricate connections, the core exercise is simple but illuminating. Its purpose it to explicitly assess the historical-cultural antecedents for the current problems and choices at hand, including issues related to people, policy and pedagogy.

We ask participants (individuals or cross sections of the school community) to draw a timeline for their school, with the founding date at the left extreme and the year 2017 at the right. They are then asked to locate key developments in the school's history and culture along this timeline. (A graphic example of a timeline done at a Lick-Wilmerding

retreat facilitated by organizational consultant David Sibbet illustrates this process.) We suggest a variety of approaches to the exercise. Our substantive prompts include: notable eras of leadership at the school; heroes/heroines; major changes in philosophy, enrollment, faculty and/or board composition; facilities or location; large gifts; and memorable crises.

Below this historical/cultural portrait, we ask participants to draw a parallel horizontal timeline delineating the same benchmark. This time we ask that they also add a vertical axis on the left side. The vertical axis represents the state of the school's financial health, with "perilous" at the bottom and "robust" at the top. The next step is to roughly plot another horizontal line on the graph which depicts the degree of the school's fiscal health through the different eras. A second horizontal line is then added which captures the depth of the school's applicant pool over time. A third horizontal line does the same with regard to the relative strength of the school's faculty during the different stages of development.

This exercise may represent only a one-person snapshot of the school's historical and cultural themes, which can take perhaps an hour. It also can be a much longer group exercise as part of a day-long retreat. In either case, insights always occur. Salient themes and trend lines begin to emerge. More importantly, the process provides a framework for continuing systematic research into the forces at work beneath the surface of day-to-day school interactions.

When working with a group of school heads, we add two further steps to this exercise. We ask participants to develop two additional timelines. Both depict benchmarks in their own lives; they begin with the date of their birth and include estimated time of retirement and anticipated year of death. On one, they are asked to chronicle experiences and events that have shaped their personal lives. Predictably, understandings emerge which relate to the roots of their particular leadership styles and choices. Debbie's background in family systems is often helpful in the illumination and relevance of the participant's birth order, gender, educational history, personality style and other significant experiences and events that have an impact on their current choices and behavior.

Having asked participants to take this focused look at their own development, we then ask that they figuratively superimpose their personal and professional timelines onto those developed for their schools. We devote considerable small group and large group time to reflecting on the themes and insights that have emerged. It is often the groups' observations and questions that enable an individual to achieve new understandings about the dynamics shaping her or his life as a head.

The most important goal of this exercise is for each participant to gauge the degree of congruence between one's own defining characteristics and those of the school. In addition, it is essential for each person to consider his or her own stage of personal and professional development in comparison to that of the school. Among other things, such an assessment helps to reinforce the temporal nature of a school head's position. It makes explicit the discomfort

inherent in the "myth of permanence" that surrounds every headship—the paradox of being seen as "the pillar of the institution" while knowing that his or her tenure will not last forever. This is a healthy perspective to have reinforced, since the head most importantly is a steward of the school's values, dreams and resources for a finite period in its history. The head's ultimate job is to dovetail the school of the present with its past and future.

There are times when the congruence between a school's evolution and that of its head is elegant. Clearly, such circumstances bode well for all involved. But there are also far too many examples at the other extreme. In the most painful instances, often culminating in "disruptive departures" and/or institutional pathologies (see Edwin Friedman's *Generation to Generation*). These repeated subversive, destructive or dysfunctional patterns wreak havoc on multiple generations of a school community and its leaders. In many cases those who hold the informal power in such schools are practiced at both "out-waiting" and "out-weighting" each successive school head. The astute head candidate will see these forces for what they are and may decide that they are so thoroughly embedded that a head has little chance of creating a healthy culture. Or, he or she may conclude that thoughtful, well-informed intervention may succeed in dramatically altering the course of the school's development.

Often, however, such institutional pathologies are difficult to identify during a head search process. One obvious reason is the on-stage, sound bite nature of the search process itself. Another is that embedded sources of

ambivalence or conflict may not be understood, or may be hidden, by the school community. Community members may not be aware that there is an "elephant in the room." Or they may be skilled at ignoring or denying its presence. It is for this reason that the new head's entry plan must be designed as both an archaeological and anthropological enterprise—to probe deeply in a short period of time.

Time is always a limiting reality in all of our lives. Leadership may be hesitant to invest the necessary time for a process such as we have outlined here. We observe that time taken for focused, thoughtful, attention to school burial grounds will diminish the hours spent responding to all that wasn't previously addressed.

A serious, dispassionate and comprehensive assessment of a school's history, defining values and culture is an essential first step to beginning a head search process. It is also an indispensable vehicle for an entering head to inform and propel his or her first chapter of a school's leadership. And, it is a process that does not end. It must be revisited and re-examined at each step in the school's ongoing strategic planning process. If a head's first chapter of leadership is about "visioning" in the context of the school's foundations, culture, history and potential, each successive chapter is about "re-visioning"—refining and extending the school's path as a series of links between past, present and future.

A school's evolution can be viewed as an epic drama. Whether major events occur on stage beneath the spotlight or behind the scenes, they must be

informed by an understanding of SBG if peace is to be made between the verities and passions of the past and the prospects for the future. Given the small space and intimate relationships that characterize independent schools (many often and perhaps to their detriment refer to themselves as a "family"), the confluence of personal and institutional agendas is especially intense and powerful. Generally in sensible balance, occasionally complicated by unhealthy cathexis (when community members are unable to distinguish between their own and the school's best interest), these relationships and goals can appear either as fertile fields or mine fields. School leaders who approach a school's "new chapter" as a clean slate, or who view history and culture as simple or benign, do so at their own and the school's peril. What you don't know, discount or deny, will, in all likelihood, come around to haunt you.

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