

The Grievance Committee

Regarding the formation of a Grievance Committee in an independent school:

The short version: There shouldn't be one.

The long version: On occasion, particularly after personnel decisions that upset the community or parental revolts over some new policy, someone urges that the board establish a structure or procedure that will ensure domestic tranquility by establishing a "review" process (thereby, presumably, eliminating in the future unfairness, capriciousness, mismanagement, and the like). In effect, the request is for the board or some supernumerary body to become a court of last resort beyond the head of school. To acquiesce to such a demand, particularly in the time of a school crisis, is, in the opinion of ISACS, folly:

- Who is to become the court of last appeal beyond the court of last appeal? The Board? In other words, there is already in our schools a "Grievance Committee," known by another name: head of school.
- Charges of "unfairness" are typically unfair most in the fact that those making the charges (the "aggrieved party") feel free to say anything about the head of school, whereas the head of school is often not at liberty at all to share the confidential circumstances of a difficult decision.
- To establish an ombudsman or mediation committee or board review committee undermines the authority of the head of school and invites community members to circumvent that authority.
- The first time a grievance committee overrules a head decision is the last time the head will have any credibility in the community.
- If the board or one of its committees decides to take on this appeals responsibility, then it diverts itself from its real responsibilities: to plan for the future of the school and studiously to avoid wandering into the domain of day to day operations.

None of this is meant to suggest that we should not be conscious of and attentive to the disgruntled "customer," be it a faculty member or parent or alum. Rather, we need to articulate better both the appropriate channels for dissent or complaints and develop better mechanisms for addressing whatever unhappiness is being expressed. (And board members must develop the strength of character that allows one to tell one's spouse, neighbor, or friend on the faculty that it is not the board's business to deal with personnel and program issues.)

Finally, we must develop the mechanisms that allow for dissent and complaints in a healthy and productive rather than recriminating and counterproductive fashion. Such mechanisms include...

- Creating a faculty advisory committee of senior faculty and faculty opinion-leaders with whom the head consults periodically.
- Developing a strong parents association that funnels suggestions and criticisms to the administration and from which the board selects an officer to join the board (to keep the board informed of developing parental themes and to communicate back to the parent body board goals and directions).
- Administering the anonymous ISACS Survey of Constituents every third year to track issues and satisfaction levels over time.

The goals of our schools include developing a partnership with parents and collegiality among faculty and administration. The very name and nature of a grievance committee militates against those goals and institutionalizes a litigious and truculently contumacious posture, the last posture we need in our schools if they are to function as families and communities.

Author: Patrick F. Bassett, Spring'96 Insert, ISACS Newsletter