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Independent Perspective: Developing Sustainable Schools

Patrick F. Bassett

The 1977 *Webster's* dictionary I still use in my home office (where I am writing this column) doesn't even have the word "sustainability" in it. The infinitive, *to sustain*, nonetheless, gets at what our current usage of *sustainability* implies: "to keep up, prolong." It's a simple idea that, once put into practice in education, opens up a world of possibility and hope -- and a new kind of long-term thinking. At the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), we believe in the concept so much we're dedicating our 2005 annual conference to the theme of sustainability. Not all school leaders see its urgency as we do. "My school's not interested in fads," one school head recently wrote regarding the conference theme. But our retort is this: while "sustainability," for some, may evoke a passing zeal for tree-hugging, we believe that all schools should, on a practical level, focus on "keeping up" and "prolonging" their own organizations. At the same time, they should be deeply interested in producing graduates capable of doing the same for their communities and for our world.

At NAIS, we believe it is essential to push for a multi-dimensional definition of school sustainability, to expand the term's meaning in several directions, in a conscious move to make independent schools stronger and more publicly accountable institutions. While it may seem to some to be an idealistic goal, we believe that it is, in fact, a survival imperative. Unless independent schools evolve to embrace a multi-dimensional approach to sustainability, they may not thrive in the future as well as they have in the past. Unless they change, they run the risk of becoming more like the independent schools much of the public already imagines them to be: elitist, unapproachable, stodgy, and financially and socially inaccessible institutions concerned only with taking care of themselves.

Simply put, NAIS sees as the core strategic imperative for independent schools to create sustainable schools for the 21st century -- sustainable, that is, in each of the following dimensions:

- Financially sustainable (becoming more efficient and less costly).
- Environmentally sustainable (becoming more "green" and less wasteful).
- Globally sustainable (becoming more networked internationally and less parochial in outlook).
- Programmatically sustainable (becoming more focused on the skills and values the marketplace of the 21st century will seek and reward -- and less narrowly isolated in a traditional disciplines approach to teaching and learning).
- Demographically sustainable (becoming more inclusive and representative of the school-age population and less unapproachable financially and socially).

In other words, "school sustainability" for us is shorthand for perhaps the five most important elements that schools need to address. If we don't address these five elements, how will we possibly "keep up" with our changing culture and "prolong" our existence?

Sustainability, like technology, may be led by the children, with us adults "getting it" late, or, in some cases, never. The "theory of generations" holds some hope for this to be the case. The theory of

generations suggests that each fourth generation repeats the characteristics of the first generation in that cycle. That would make the current generation in schools now, what we are calling the "Millennial Generation," the natural inheritors of mindset and attitudes of the GI Generation, what Tom Brokaw called "The Greatest Generation" in his book of the same name. That postwar mindset and attitude believed that it was possible for us to partner with others, to be problem-solvers on a global scale (witness the formation of the UN and the Marshall Plan), that no problem, however seemingly insurmountable, could withstand the combination of faithful optimism and purposeful determination.

According to Marc Porter Magee (writing in *The Education Gadfly*, October 16, 2004), the millennials -- the "echo boom" of baby boomer children born between 1977 and 1994 -- are nearly as numerous as the boomers and have even greater confidence in their ability to change the world. Yet, while millennials have demonstrated keener interest than their parents in taking jobs that serve the public, they show less interest in working in traditional governmental bureaucracies. Instead, public-spirited millennials are drawn towards smaller nonprofit ventures where they can see the positive impact of their work first-hand, and have more to do with shaping that work.... Harvard's Joseph Nye and John Donahue sum up the situation this way: "To the extent that the work is highly bureaucratized, hostile to initiative, rule-bound, and rigged into rigid career ladders, it is less appealing to young people today.... It is not surprising that many public-spirited young Americans view the nonprofit sector more favorably as a setting for doing good...."

If it's true that the "hand that rocks the cradles rules the world," we should take heart: independent schools have a disproportionate access to the future generation of leadership in the cradle we call school, and, if the theory of generations holds, we'll have a receptive audience, not only in terms of the millennials currently in our schools as students, but also in terms of their older brothers and sisters in universities and those now just entering into the workplace who will become our next generation of teachers. It will require, of course, as Margaret Mead's dictum indicates, "a handful of committed citizens" to change the world. NAIS hopes that its 2005 Annual Conference on sustainability will help generate that handful of committed citizens in our community, and that the NAIS summer institutes on sustainability, financing schools, and diversity will give the early adopters and practitioners new tools and skills and models to lead the way for us as an industry.

How will schools know when they're truly sustainable institutions?

- *Sustainable School Finances:* You'll know your school's sustainable when you observe a financial equilibrium so that the annual increase in tuition is in step with the annual increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) -- or at least not wildly beyond that, as has been the case recently. To get to that point, schools will have to improve efficiencies in order to get to a more competitive position in the marketplace, rather than losing ground. For that to happen, they will have to stop increasing the size of their staffs by freezing the adding of programs or services, unless they can simultaneously eliminate other programs or services. They would also have to increase enrollment over time or reduce staff through attrition so that the ratio of students to employees becomes leaner.
- *Sustainable School Facilities:* You'll know your school is sustainable when part of what is studied is the school itself: the school's impact on the environment and its institutional example of environmental awareness and conservation. We are already seeing the impact of conservation and the greening of college and school campuses through environmental engineering, where slightly higher initial investments promise yields over time of considerable savings.

- *Sustainable School Globalism*: You'll know your school is sustainable when you become a school without borders, partnering with a sister school. Such partnerships will entail teaming across oceans and cultures to do global problem solving and offering rich opportunities for teacher and student exchanges for a term at a time.
- *Sustainable School Programming*: You'll know your school is sustainable when you have a project-based and skills-based curriculum that is interdisciplinary and topically relevant. The school will have defined the skills and values that the 21st century will reward (including teaming, communication, global thinking, and ethical decision-making), and redesign how and what we teach accordingly.
- *Sustainable School Admissions*: You'll know your school is sustainable when the student population better represents the community and world that students will engage with when they enter the university or workplace. For that to happen, you will have to be, in Gandhi's words, "the change you seek in the world" by seeking a much more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse faculty and student body. For the skeptics in the independent school community, I would share an observation that we know to be true about diversity -- that appeals to ideals don't usually work, but appeals to enlightened self-interest do. The best illustration regarding sustainability comes from Jared Diamond (speaking at the Conservation International dinner in Seattle recently):

Most of us parents set as the highest goal of our personal financial planning to secure our children's future, by drawing up a will, buying life insurance, sending our kids to good schools, investing carefully and perhaps setting up a trust. But you are wasting those efforts and you are throwing away all of that money if you don't also invest to ensure that your kids end up in a world worth living in.

So here's the challenge: let's both teach our children about the decisions we'll have to make individually and collectively so their children will have a world worth inheriting; and since doing rather than telling is the best teacher, let's find ways, together, to model what a sustainable school and world would look like.

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