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NAIS RESEARCH

Summary of Findings from *Head of School Retention in Independent Schools*
by Kevin Yaley, School of Leadership and
Education Sciences, University of San
Diego, California

National Association of Independent Schools

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Summary

This study by Kevin Yaley, head of the Francis Parker School in San Diego, California, sought to identify potential motivating factors, including, and most especially, the relationship between the head and the board chair, and to investigate to what extent, if any, these factors influence the behaviors and attitudes of heads as they relate to job satisfaction.

This mixed-methods study, which included both qualitative and quantitative research techniques and focusing solely on the experiences and perceptions of a select group of NAIS heads from across the country, produced results that shed light on what really matters to heads of school when it comes to their job satisfaction and their decision to remain at their current school.

The first phase of research (quantitative) attempted to examine the general attitudes of the participants concerning their current job satisfaction and their satisfaction with their relationship with the board chair, as well as other motivating factors that might influence them to continue in their current job. This quantitative study included a 45-question survey relying primarily on the use of Likert scale responses.

The second phase of research (qualitative) utilized a semi-structured interview containing both follow-up questions consistent with the survey content and questions emerging from a purposeful and informed analysis of the quantitative portion of the study. These interview questions effectively deepened the quantitative research findings and provided context and perspective generally.

A summary of the findings as reported in the researcher's dissertation follows. To read the entire study, visit digital.sandiego.edu/dissertations/192.

Findings

1. Building and maintaining a strong partnership between a school's head and its board chair is vital to the success of the head, the board, the board chair, and the school.

The study results, in both the quantitative and qualitative phases, reinforce the idea that building and maintaining a strong partnership between a school's head and its board chair is vital to the success of the head, the board, the board chair, and the school. In the literature, a compelling argument has been made time and again that the head and board chair partnership is the single most important relationship in the school. This study provides systematically generated empirical evidence to support this claim.

The literature has consistently suggested that, in order for the head/board chair partnership to flourish—and thereby the school itself to flourish—this partnership between the head and the board chair requires constant care, attention, and enrichment.¹

It would follow, then, that when this partnership is strong, the overall job satisfaction of the head, the likelihood of the head remaining in partnership with the chair, and thereby the head's desire to continue to serve the school would all increase. This, in turn, would benefit the overall health, stability, and success of the school. Conversely, when this partnership is unstable, fractured, or unhealthy, we would expect the risk of a head departure to increase, inevitably leading to some degree of disruption, uncertainty, and strain on the school community.

What has been made abundantly clear in the findings from both the quantitative and the qualitative research in this study is that, of the various aspects that make up the job of

¹ NAIS, "Partner with the Head of School," *NAIS Trustees' Guide*, 2019; online at <https://www.nais.org/trustees-guide/partner-with-the-head-of-school/>. Anne-Marie Balzano and Amada Torres, "The Governance and Leadership Outlook," *2019-2020 NAIS Trendbook* (Washington, DC: NAIS, 2019), pp. 65-77. Troy Baker, Stephen Campbell, and Dave Ostroff, *Independent School Leadership: Heads, Boards and Strategic Thinking* (Nashville, TN: Peabody College at Vanderbilt University, 2015); online at <https://www.nais.org/articles/documents/member/school-leadership-heads-boards-strategic-thinking.pdf>.

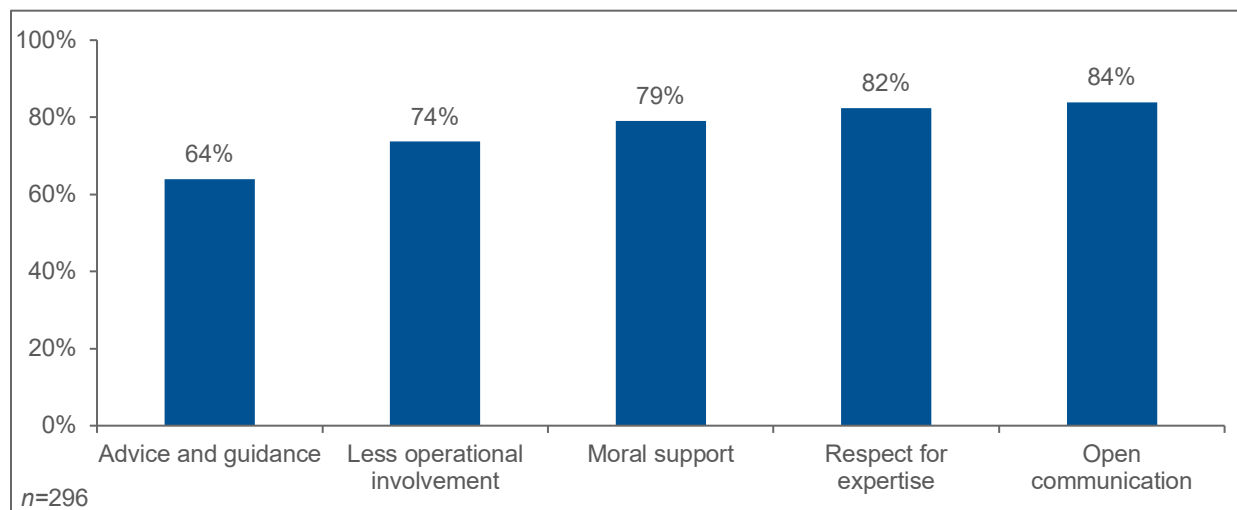
independent school heads, their relationship with the board chair is an essential and inescapable component of their work and their success and a significant influencing factor in their job satisfaction and their decision to remain in their current position.

This study set out to identify to what extent, if at all, various motivating factors impact the head's level of job satisfaction. While my research investigated various motivators, what those factors have in common—whether they be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature—is that each is impacted in meaningful and lasting ways through the partnership a head has with the board chair.

Using the five key aspects to building and sustaining a healthy head and board chair partnership identified by Tekakwitha Pernambuco-Wise and Olaf Jorgenson—moral support, respect for expertise, advice and guidance, less operational involvement, and open communication—the findings from the first phase of the research clearly support the notion that *open communication* is among the most important aspects of a healthy and successful partnership.² In fact, respondents ranked open communication number one.

² Tekakwitha Pernambuco-Wise and Olaf Jorgenson, “Supporting Heads,” *Independent School Magazine*, Fall 2016; online at <https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/fall-2016/supporting-heads/>.

Average percent of respondents who agree or strongly agree that their relationship to their board chairs contains elements important to head-board relationships



In the second phase of the study, qualitative survey findings captured all 15 participants commenting on the critical importance of maintaining open and honest communication. Of the 15 heads interviewed in the qualitative phase of my research, eight singled out “open and honest communication” as the most important, while the other seven all noted it was as important as the other four aspects.

Another critical factor to a healthy head and board chair partnership that surfaced in the second phase of the research was the notion that this partnership needs to be nurtured long before the formal appointment of the board chair is made. No matter how long the partnership between the head and chair is, 13 of the 15 heads not only shared their profound and considerable influence in the selection or nomination process for the board chair but also contended that in order to be able to successfully identify the next board chair, there needs to be a substantial investment of time and thought early on in the selection process. This is, after all, a partnership that will be grounded in mutual trust, respect, and support. To that end, heads were resolute in their conviction that like any healthy relationship, the future partnership between the head and the board chair needs to have the time to grow, develop, and earn the very trust upon which it rests.

The appointment of the board chair has often been conducted in the absence of the head and without any formal input into the ultimate selection. But all but one of the heads interviewed testified personally that the practice of engaging the head in the identification, cultivation, and ultimate selection of the board chair-elect was one they believed influenced significantly both their effectiveness as head and their decision to continue in their current position.

The findings from the qualitative research indicate that the overwhelming majority of the heads felt appropriately engaged in the exploratory and vetting stages of determining the next board chair, while agreeing that the ultimate decision is and should be in the hands of the board itself and its appropriate committee (e.g., Nominating Committee, Board Governance Committee, Committee on Trustees, etc.). And, most significantly, all 15 heads commented on the positive impact this open, inclusive, and transparent process had on their decision to remain at their current school. As one head noted:

I believe that the head should play [a] big part [in the] decision, and my board has always made my voice heard in selecting the next chair. Let's just say that the process is very humane to me as head. And getting it right is key because a strong, intimate relationship with the chair is critical to health and survival of [the] head.

If the school is to operate according to the fundamental belief that the head and board chair relationship is not one that should be viewed as boss to employee or subject to object but as a partnership defined by a sense of mutual consent and commitment, it makes perfect sense to ensure that the head of school plays a major role in recruiting and selecting the new board chair. Just as the board will ultimately choose the head, so too should the head, at least to an appropriate degree, participate in the selection of the board chair. After all, they are—or, at least, hope to become—partners in leadership.

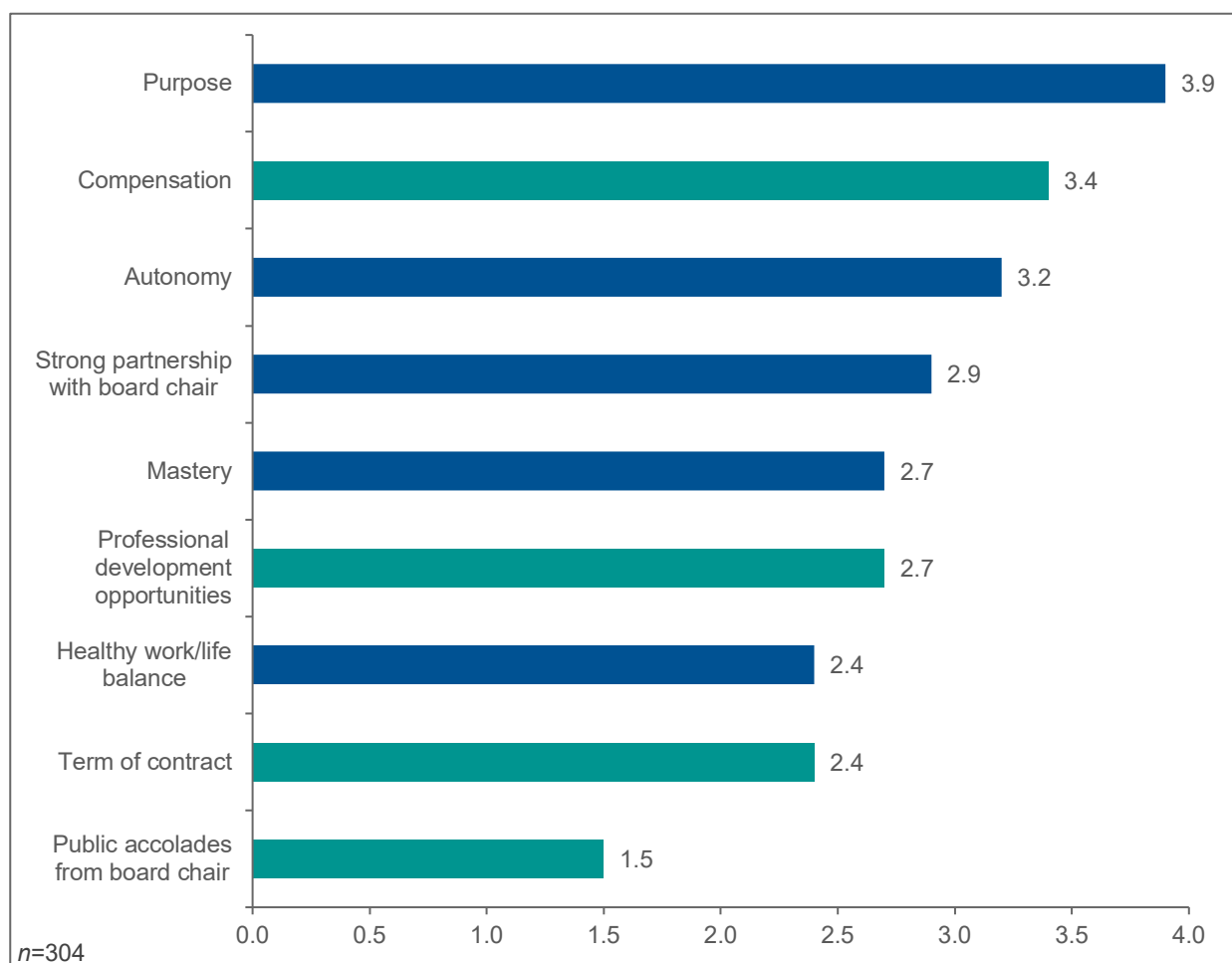
2. Heads are professionally stimulated by two key intrinsic motivators: autonomy and purpose.

Another significant discovery in both phases of the research is the extent to which heads are professionally stimulated by two key intrinsic motivators: *autonomy* and *purpose*. And while

this study convincingly concluded that one extrinsic motivator—*compensation*—factors in on the heads' level of job satisfaction, this research suggests that what carries equal, if not greater, weight in terms of whether heads decide to stay at their school and how long they stay is whether they truly experience a sense of purpose and autonomy in their work.

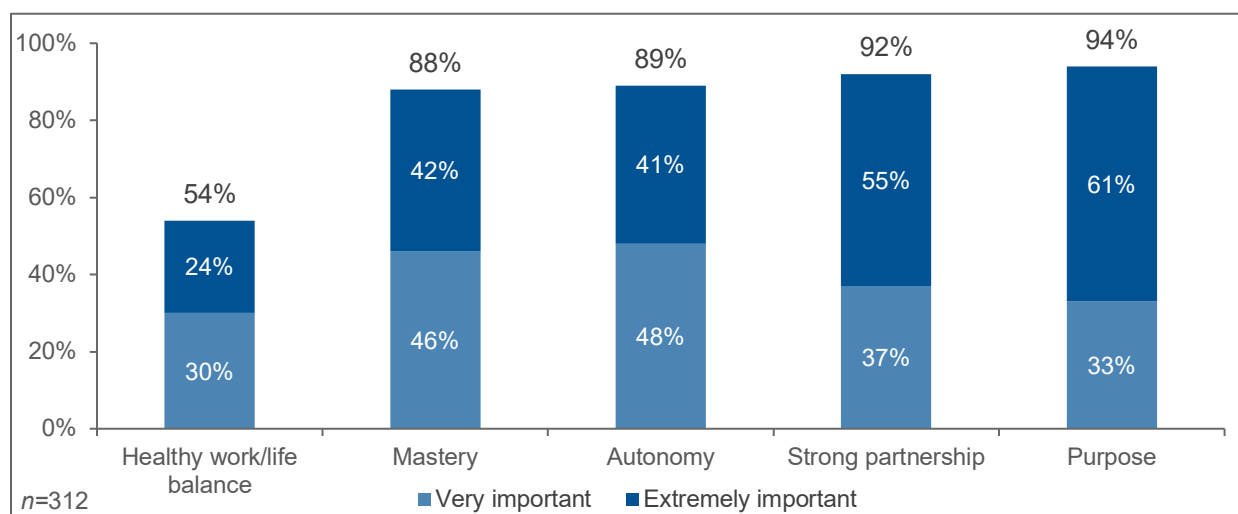
In phase one of the study, when respondents ranked the intrinsic motivators, purpose was the highest ranked, and convincingly so.

Heads' average ranking of intrinsic (navy) and extrinsic (teal) motivators on a four-point scale



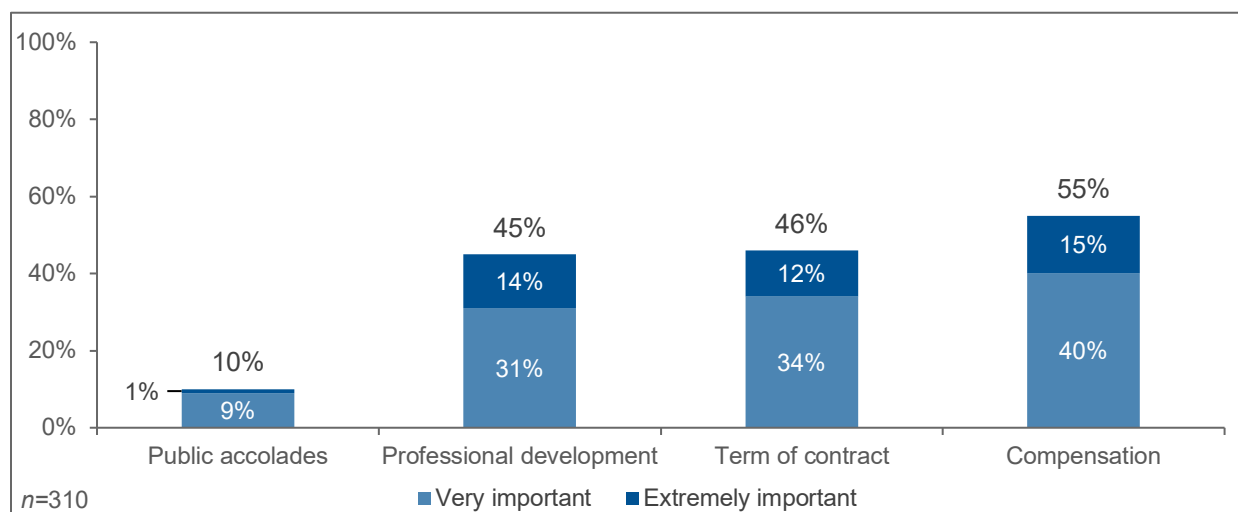
In fact, purpose also garnered the highest degree of importance, with 95% of heads considering it to be either extremely (62%) or very (33%) important. Autonomy was a strong intrinsic motivator as well; 89% of the heads considered it to be either extremely (48%) or very (41%) important.

Heads' rating of intrinsic motivators as "very" or "extremely" important



Although compensation was the second-highest ranked motivator overall and the highest-rated extrinsic motivator, only 55% of heads considered it to be either extremely (15%) or very (45%) important.

Heads' rating of extrinsic motivators as "very" or "extremely" important



Analysis of the results from the second phase of the research confirmed these findings. Twelve of the 15 heads called out purpose as one of the driving forces—if not *the* driving force—behind their continued work, with one head stating matter-of-factly, “There is no question in my mind that *purpose* is the most important influence on my decision to be—and remain—the head of a school.” Autonomy, which is understood to be the desire to direct our own lives, was specifically called out by nine of the 15 interviewees as one of the top intrinsic motivators to remain in their current position.

If motivation answers the question of why we do what we do—i.e., what is the reason, the purpose, the intention, or the root cause of our action—then it is clear that, above all else, the heads generally agree that to be granted the autonomy to work toward a clear purpose—whether it be working to build relationships, develop and nurture individuals, or humbly serve their community—is one of the most impactful motivating factors to remain in their current position.

This finding is consistent with discussions, in this case, theoretical discussions, in the

literature.³ This research, for example, strongly suggests that all people, heads included, ultimately seek to discover meaningful experiences in our work and in our life. These experiences are defined by the moments when we are acting out of intrinsic motivation entirely.

3. Few heads believe maintaining a healthy work/life balance to be important because the very notion of this type of balance is, in the real-life experiences of the heads, simply impossible to achieve.

One of the most curious discoveries that resulted from the mixed-methods research study dealt with the perceptions of *maintaining a healthy work/life balance* and the extent to which this concern influenced the decisions of the heads to remain at their current school. It was clear that maintaining a healthy work/life balance carried a relatively small amount of sway in terms of the influence it had on heads' decision to remain in their current position. When heads were asked to rank the five intrinsic motivators, maintaining a healthy work/life balance was in a distant fifth and last place. Of the five intrinsic factors, the fewest number of heads ranked it as extremely (31%) or very (24%) important.

Interestingly, after I analyzed the qualitative responses, this finding was not only validated but I discovered critical information offering the fundamental reason why this factor carries such little influence in the minds of heads; namely, it is not that heads do not long for a healthy work/life balance but rather that the very notion of this type of balance is, in the real-life experiences of the heads, simply impossible to achieve.

The interviews in the second phase of the research confirmed this widely accepted belief among heads that the idea of maintaining even a semblance of balance is nearly impossible due to the nature and the relentless demands of the job. During the interviews, a number of the heads chuckled at the notion of actually maintaining even the slightest likeness of such a balance. For

³ Clayton P. Alderfer, "An Empirical Test of a New Theory of Human Needs," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 4, no. 2, pp. 142–175, 1968. Frederick Herzberg, *Work and the Nature of Man*, rev. ed. (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1974). Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review*, 50, no. 4, pp. 370–396, 1943. Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).

example, one head commented, “I smiled at the work/life balance bit. Do you know any heads with work/life balance? I'd like to talk with them.” Another head shared:

I think heads need to commit to the absurdity of the job in terms of the time demands. My partner always reminds me that heads don't have jobs, they have lifestyles. And any notion of a life/work balance is a fallacy.

To be sure, there is no shortage of articles written by health and career experts promoting the importance of maintaining a healthy work/life balance.⁴ And many of these experts happily put forth simple suggestions that presumably guarantee that even in the most demanding of jobs one can discover that illusive work/life balance if we just make some basic changes. They all seem to agree that each of us can achieve this balance by simply changing up our attitude, approach, and commitment to our work. Inspiring though they may be, according to the findings of my research, making these basic changes in order to achieve the balance they purport can't ever truly be achieved.

In commenting on this notion of maintaining a healthy work/life balance, two of the heads offered up rather bleak and fatalistic responses, noting that the imbalance is getting worse and worse due to changing external factors and pressures that are out of their control. According to one head:

Good luck with work/life balance. It just isn't possible. It is only getting worse due to many factors out of our control including the growing complexity of job, parental expectations, and the world. And, sadly, the ever-increasing litigious nature of our society.

Still another wrapped it up by simply concluding that “the notion of maintaining a healthy

⁴ Deborah Jian Lee, “6 Tips for Better Work-Life Balance,” *Forbes Magazine*, October 20, 2014; online at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahlee/2014/10/20/6-tips-for-better-work-life-balance/>. Mayo Clinic, “Work-Life Balance: Tips to Reclaim Control,” *Healthy Lifestyle: Adult Health*, August 25, 2020; online at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/work-life-balance/art-20048134>. Mental Health America, “Work Life Balance,” n.d.; online at <https://www.mhanational.org/work-life-balance>.

work/life balance is not a reality; it is a myth.”

Implications for Practice

1. Remember the primacy of the head-board chair partnership.

Over the last decade, research conducted by NAIS has revealed a noticeable rise in the percentage of schools dealing with head turnover in independent schools across the country, escalating from 8% in 2010-2011 to 21% in 2019-2020.⁵ The reasons why an increasing number of heads are departing at a disquieting rate are in many cases as enigmatic as the departures themselves.

As part of its governance responsibilities, the board has unconditional authority over the employment of the head, including, most especially, the ability to influence the short- and long-term retention of the head. Unfortunately, information about the reasons behind the departure of a head is hard to come by due to both the need to preserve confidentiality and the desire of schools to communicate these decisions in as amicable and mutually beneficial manner as possible in order to minimize the inevitable disruption to the school community such departures create.

The findings of this research have, to some extent at least, identified motivating factors—including, and most especially, aspects of the head and board chair partnership—that appear to influence, at least to some degree, the level of job satisfaction experienced by heads and, as a result, their decision to remain at their current school. The findings of this research should remind boards of the primacy of the head and chair partnership and encourage boards to continue and, possibly, increase the amount of time and resources invested in supporting and fostering this partnership.

Moreover, the research could serve as a reminder to boards of the weight and magnitude the partnership has in the overall success of the school. Mindful of the fact that the research has

⁵ Margaret Anne Rowe, “Head Turnover at Independent Schools: Sustaining School Leadership,” NAIS, February 2020; online at <https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/research/nais-research-head-turnover-at-independent-schools-sustaining-school-leadership/>.

shown that head retention at independent schools strengthens school culture, promotes student academic achievement, bolsters student reenrollment and retention, and improves general morale, boards and board chairs—those who are entrusted with the health and success of the school—would be inspired to invest heavily and appropriately in the partnership a board and, especially, its chair has with the head.

2. Take a collaborative and adaptive approach to crisis management.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, heads were reminded time and again of what many, including search consultant Eric Peterson, know to be true: Unlike anything else, a crisis will test the strength and fortitude of that most essential head and board chair partnership; consequently,

an effective board chair/head partnership is the cornerstone of a successful school, but nothing undermines that success faster than when the chair and the head are moving in different directions, especially when the school and community are under stress due to some type of crisis.⁶

Among other suggestions of how to avoid letting the crisis destabilize the partnership, Peterson encourages board chairs to be sure to stay in their lane and publicly and privately support the work of the head in running the school. Peterson warns, “If the board is perceived to have taken over during the crisis, the head’s authority and leadership is significantly weakened, and the school is generally worse for it.”⁷

Ideally, the head and the board should seize the opportunity to take a collaborative and adaptive approach to crisis management, with the head maintaining responsibility for all operational plans and execution, while the board reviews and responds to policy, strategy, risk management, long-term financial impact, and crisis communications. If ever there were a time to know your respective roles, maintain open and honest communication, and cooperate in a true spirit of partnership, alliance, and collaboration, that time is now. As business consultant Ann Cohen

⁶ Eric Peterson, “Boards Supporting Heads in a Crisis,” Wickenden Associates, March 20, 2020; online at <https://www.wickenden.com/boards-supporting-heads-crisis/>.

⁷ Ibid.

notes, now more than ever we need to look to the partnership between the head and the chair if we are ever to successfully navigate our way through this extraordinary crisis. Cohen explains:

Exceptional boards govern in constructive partnership with the chief executive, recognizing that the effectiveness of the board and chief executive are interdependent. The board is a powerful force supporting the organization, while the CEO sees the board as a strategic asset.⁸

This is a time for the head and the board chair to first see one another as true allies united together for the sake of the greater good, which, in some cases, is the very survival of the school.

⁸ Ann Cohen, “Partnership in a Time of Pandemic: The CEO and the Board,” BoardSource Blog, April 17, 2020; online at <https://blog.boardsource.org/blog/partnership-in-a-time-of-pandemic-the-ceo-and-the-board>.

Appendix: Definition of Terms

- **Autonomy:** The desire to direct our own lives
- **Purpose:** The yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves
- **Mastery:** The urge to get better and better at something that matters⁹

⁹ Pink, *Drive*.