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Why Teach in an Independent School

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With a plethora of lucrative career choices and opportunities facing highly educated and competent people, one might rightly ask, "Why would anyone choose to teach in an independent school?" The answer in a word is rewards: personal, professional, and even financial.

Satisfaction: Recent research on independent school teachers indicates that 84% were very satisfied with their teaching jobs and 90% planned to continue teaching, a much higher satisfaction rate than in the general working population, and significantly higher than the satisfaction levels at other kinds of schools. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not comfortable and 5 = very comfortable), independent school teachers in the study indicated extraordinarily high comfort levels with the subjects they teach (4.74) and the students they teach (4.73). They indicated equally high scores on various litmus-test satisfaction questions: looking forward to work each day (4.36); teaching career as having more advantages than disadvantages (4.49); becoming a teacher again if they had the chance to start all over (3.95); and having a high level of influence on designing curricula (89%).¹ Whereas teacher attrition in other types of schools tends to be high, especially in the first three years, it is quite low in independent schools.

Compensation: Although historically in America, teacher salaries universally have been low in comparison to salaries for other professionals with comparable skill sets and entry requirements for education and degrees, all of that is changing dramatically in the face of the coming crisis in teacher recruitment (due to dire shortages emerging in the labor force). Public school starting salaries are rising dramatically on a national basis (but varying by locality, of course, throughout the country), and independent schools are beginning to catch up, with many boards of trustees setting the bar at 90% to 100% or more of the local public school benchmarks. Historically, teachers have been willing to work in independent schools for less cash compensation than they would receive in the local public schools because of the "climate advantage" in independent schools, but boards are beginning to recognize that the climate advantage must be supplemented by competitiveness in cash compensation. Therefore, many boards of trustees are moving purposefully to increase teachers' salaries. Daniel Pink, in his book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, shows the research that indicates that salary (beyond the level that which is perceived to be fair and allow for living a lifestyle of what we call "middle-class dignity") does not motivate most individuals, even in the for-profit world. Instead there are three factors that do motivate individuals: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. There are few if any jobs in the world that allow employees more autonomy (setting one's own goals), mastery (supporting one's own professional growth), and purpose (working towards a noble end) than that of an independent school teacher.²

Independent schools tend to be very competitive with other types of schools (and with other industries) in terms of benefits. Typically, benefits in independent schools include top-line health and life insurance commitments, generous leave and vacation policies, and family-friendly policies (including preferential treatment in admissions and financial aid for one's own children to attend the school). There is an assumption that public school pensions are incomparably generous, but, in fact, independent school pensions are often better because the former are "defined benefit" plans (e.g., 1.5% of the final year's salary times the number of years served) and the latter are "defined contribution" plans (e.g., the employer and employee match contributions to an annuity plan — typically TIAA/CREF — whose value grows through investments to exceed that of defined benefit plans, often exceeding the defined benefit plans by twice as much or more).

Climate: Independent schools are seen within the field of education as having a significant "climate advantage" over other types of schools and other types of work. In polling of independent school teachers on the question of why they chose to teach in independent schools (and why they stay), in response after response the teachers cite the quality

of the students and the appropriateness of the climate as key factors.³ Simply put, independent schools control the student culture and norms of behavior (the keystones for building a school climate that works for kids and for teachers), and believe that teachers are professionals entitled to design their own curricula.

Independent schools seek as teachers individuals who are idealistic, passionate about teaching in general and about one or more fields of study in particular, and who are caring in their relationships with students and colleagues. One of the advantages of independent schools is that they are "independent" in governance and finance, and therefore are afforded freedoms unique to the model, including the freedom to hire teachers who qualify by independent standards (i.e., state certification is not an issue for most independent schools) and to give teachers the independence to teach what they believe is "true" (i.e., freedom to design one's own curriculum). Absent the bureaucracy of "the central office," independent school teachers are liberated to teach what and how they believe best serves their students.

Teachers are what James M. Banner, Jr. and Harold C. Cannon call "custodians of culture."⁴ There is a palpable sense in independent schools that the work is important, in fact critical. Teaching passes on the lessons of the culture, thereby perpetuating the civilization. Accordingly, independent schools value and validate teachers in a way that is not evident, sadly, in the wider culture.

Diversity: Independent school teachers are committed to diversity and to creating inclusive and multicultural environments. Although the public perception is that independent schools lack diversity, research shows that independent schools tend to be more diverse than many other types of schools,⁵ since independent schools actively seek diversity and draw from many communities, and public schools are dependent on neighborhood living patterns where populations tend to concentrate in ethnic enclaves. On average, 15 - 20% of the student body of a typical independent school receives financial aid and 15 - 20% of the student body is composed of students of color.

Leverage: In an ideal world, all children in America would have the opportunity to attend schools that have the advantages of independent schools, where the culture of the school is strongly academic, and where the ethos of caring and responsible citizenship ("the second curriculum" or "the character curriculum" of independent schools) is evidenced daily. Until that day arrives, teaching in independent schools allows teachers to leverage their impact, since graduates of independent schools attend and graduate from college (and therefore end up in leadership roles in the community) in representation hugely disproportionate to their numbers. Whereas only about 50% of America's teenagers actually get to college and only 50% of them actually graduate within six years of starting, virtually 100% of independent school students not only attend college but also persist to achieve four-year degrees. As Margaret Mead reminds us, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Independent schools do no less than imprint the hearts and minds of those who will succeed us as leaders in the communities of the future.

End Notes:

¹Witt, Diane S. & Robert M. The Teachers as Professionals Project. Funded by the Hawaii Community Foundation, vii, 10-11, 25.

²Pink, Daniel. Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us.:Riverhead Hardcover.

³Poll of ISACS teachers on the subject of "Why Do You Teach in an IndependentSchool?"

⁴Banner, James M. & Cannon, Harold C. The Elements of Teaching. New Haven: Yale University Press, 23.

⁵Jay P. Greene, Nicole Mellow. "Integration Where it Counts: A Study of Racial Integration in Public and Private School Lunchrooms." Research presented at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

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