

Independent School Leadership Transition Planning



CENTER FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING
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Succession Readiness Checklist¹



- ❑ A strategic plan is in place with vision and goals for the near term including objectives for leadership talent development
- ❑ The board evaluates the head of school annually on general performance and achievement of strategic goals
- ❑ The board, based on its annual self-evaluation is satisfactorily performing its major governance jobs – financial oversight, executive support and oversight, policy development, and strategic planning
- ❑ The head of school's direct reports, based on annual evaluations, are judged as solidly skilled for their positions

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Succession Readiness Checklist



❑ The top management team:

- has a solid team culture in place in which members support one another and can reach decisions as a group efficiently and harmoniously;
- shares leadership with the head in having significant input to all major school decisions;
- can lead the in the absence of the head;
- has authority to make and carry out decisions in their area of responsibility.

❑ Another staff person or board member shares important external relationships (donors, funders, community leaders) maintained by the head.

Succession Readiness Checklist



- ❑ A financial reserve is in place with a minimum of three months' operating capital.
- ❑ Financial systems meet industry standards. Financial reports are up to date and provide the data needed by the board and senior managers responsible for the agency's financial strength and viability.
- ❑ Operational manuals exist for key administrative systems and are easily accessible and up to date.
- ❑ Top program staff have documented their key activities in writing and have identified another staff person who can carry their duties in an emergency.

Types of Leadership Transitions



1. **STRATEGIC LEADER DEVELOPMENT**
2. **EMERGENCY SUCCESSION (OR LEADERSHIP) PLANNING**
3. **DEPARTURE-DEFINED SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Three Approaches



- **Strategic Leader Development**
 - ✦ Goal is ongoing practice of identifying leadership and management skills necessary to achieve vision and recruiting and retaining talented individuals who have or can develop those skills
- **Emergency Succession Planning**
 - ✦ Goal is continuity of leadership in times of emergency
- **Departure-defined Succession Planning**
 - ✦ Goal is successful leadership transition during times of planned change when a long-term leader has announced departure 1.5 years or more in advance

Emergency Succession Planning



Should include:

- A written emergency back-up plan
- Contact information for key stakeholders
- Instructions for informing key stakeholders of the unplanned absence
- A cross-training plan for designated executive backups
- Updated or new executive job description if needed

Key Steps in Emergency Succession Planning in Schools

1. Identify critical leadership and management functions of the head of school.
2. Agree upon which functions should be covered by an acting head of school and the extent and limitations of authority.
3. Agree upon who has the authority to appoint an acting head of school.
4. Agree upon standing appointee to the acting head with first and second back-ups.
5. Develop a cross-training plan for the identified backups that ensures they develop their abilities to carry on the head's key functions.
6. Agree upon how the board will support and supervise an acting head.
7. Draft a communications plan to be implemented in the event of an emergency succession.
8. Outline procedures to be followed in the event that an emergency absence becomes a permanent unplanned absence.
9. Updated or new head of school job description if needed.

Board role and possible action steps



- ✦ Select two board members (from the Executive Committee and COT) to form an Emergency Succession Planning Committee that will:
 - Review any existing plan and agree on core head of school functions
 - Provide comments on plan drafts developed by the head of school
 - Present the plan to the full board for approval and adoption
 - Lead board procedures to manage a head transition in the event of a permanent unplanned absence.

Departure-Defined Succession Planning



A successor will be most likely to thrive if...

...s/he inherits a doable head of school job description and a competent senior team sharing management and leadership responsibilities.

“Thrive” = A positive, forward-looking relationship between the next head of school who fits current and future leadership needs and a school and board prepared to work with this talented new leader

Departure-Defined Succession Planning Components Prior to Transition



1. *Identify* the school's goals and vulnerabilities going forward.
2. *Determine* the values, tools, and cultural 'fit' a new head will need to have to achieve those goals.
3. *Build* the capacity of the board, management team and organizational systems to sustain funding and programs beyond the current head's tenure.

Key Board Responsibilities



1. *Assist and support* the outgoing head.
2. *Prepare for new leadership* by addressing institutional vulnerabilities.
3. *Search for and select* a new head of school based on institutional direction, needs, and vulnerabilities.
4. *Oversee preparations* for new leadership.
5. *Assist and support* the incoming head.

Departure-Defined Leadership Transition: Three Main Phases

Phase 1 - Planning

Key tasks:

- ❑ Transition planning
- ❑ Search planning

Target Outcomes

- School's executive leadership needs are met during transition
- Confirm or clarify strategic direction
- Identify any transition-associated implications of this strategic focus
- Capacity-building efforts to provide a solid platform for the next school head

Departure-Defined Leadership Transition



Phase 2: Selection

Key tasks:

- ❑ Search
- ❑ Selection
- ❑ Institutional preparation

Target Outcomes

- A diverse and qualified finalist pool
- Staff and board adapting to leadership changes
- Lingering open issues addressed
- Needed financial or infrastructure strengthening

Departure-Defined Leadership Transition



Phase 3 - Onboarding

Target Outcomes

Key tasks:

- ❑ Post-hire launch and 12-18 month transition support

- New head is welcomed by school community
- New head entry plan with first year goals and relationship-building priorities is developed and implemented
- 12-18 month leadership agenda established by board and head and communicated to stakeholders
- Systems for monitoring and evaluating board and head performance



Phase 1 Unpacked: Transition Planning and Search Planning

1. Reflection by the departing head about personal and organizational issues or barriers.
2. Set the departure date (18 months out is typical).
3. Form a Succession Planning Committee (can have subgroups, such as a Search Committee and a Transition Committee).
4. Prepare a communications plan (how soon to tell what to whom and by what means).
5. Identify school vulnerabilities via a 'sustainability audit.'
6. Design and implement strategies to address vulnerabilities.
7. Identify the school's broad strategic directions 3-5 years out.

Steps in Departure- defined Succession Planning

8. Solidify the management team in light of vulnerabilities and skills demanded by the strategic directions.
9. Build the board's leadership abilities.
10. Back-up key head of school relationships.
11. Put finances in order.
12. Build financial reserves and secure multi-year program funding.
13. Agree on the parameters of the head's off-boarding role if one is set up (how long if any overlap period for on-call consulting, advisory, or other role)
14. Set the executive search strategy.

Best Practices for 18-month through 3-year Defined-Departures

- ❑ **Strategic planning** – revisiting and updating; challenge is to set direction while leaving room for the next head to make his/her mark; outcome can be greater organizational capacity
- ❑ **Board assessment** – self-assessment of how the board operates and how it wants to change
- ❑ **Organizational assessment** – of the health and vitality of the school, including the strengths to build on and the challenges to address
- ❑ **Sustainability planning** – succession planning that is broad enough to look at programs, leadership, and systems

Sample Timeline



- Set departure date 18 months prior
- Develop written transition plan 16-18 months prior
- Interview and select search firm 14-16 months prior
- Go public 12-14 months prior
- Select new head 9-12 months prior
- Install new head Onboarding date
- Post-installation assessment 6 months after onboarding to identify early points of challenge
- Transition management 12-18 months after onboarding

Common Leadership Transition Risks in Schools and Possible Mitigations

Risks

- Departure of an iconic head



Mitigations

- Getting closure through ritual, concrete steps to saying good-bye, physical separation, time
- ‘Planned time to adjust’ through an interim head
- ‘Ethical will’; transference of ‘sacred’ values

Common Leadership Transition Risks in Schools and Possible Mitigations

Risks

- Financial fragility
- Board instability or need for increased bench strength

Mitigations

- Workable plan for financial stabilization
- Develop a board succession plan for its own leadership succession while maintaining a board contingent that can act as a bridge between departing and entering heads

Common Leadership Transition Risks in Schools and Possible Mitigations

Risk

- Loss of confidence and/or trust in the institution

Mitigation

- Performance on leadership transition plan
- Evidence of financial stabilization
- Strategic communication

Talking points



- When will the new head start?
- Is the school prepared?
- How will the new head be chosen?
- What are you looking for in the new head? I know someone...
- Will there be staff involvement?
- What about our mission? Will our school be our school with a new head?
- How does the staff/board feel about this change?

What's next?

Decision points

- Identify and decide how to address vulnerabilities
- Plan for search and selection process
- Plan for communication
- Create structures to implement:
 - ✦ HOS Leadership Transition Team (holistic including head exit strategy, onboarding decisions, communications planning, and 12-18 month post-installation transition oversight)
 - ✦ Search Committee
 - ✦ BOT Succession Planning Team



Moving Forward



What can we do together?

What can I do individually?

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