

The NAIS Perspective

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A theme of the National Association of Independent Schools is that “values are the value-added of an independent school education.” With the dramatic rise in the cost of an independent school education over the last decade, a new generation of parents has begun carefully calculating the RoI (“return on investment”) for many years of independent school tuition payments. Given that a seemingly increasing proportion of parents misguidedly measure that return on a single factor, acceptance into the parents’ very short list of acceptable colleges, this study is a timely and refreshing reaffirmation of the historic role of independent schools: to teach scholarship *and* character, “values as the value-added. From the very beginning of independent schools in America, the emphasis was on character development. The Phillips brothers who founded both Phillips Exeter Academy and Phillips Andover, expected that the teacher’s “attention to the disposition of the minds and morals of the youth under his charge will exceed every other care; well considering that, though goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous; and that both united form the noblest character. The first and principal object of this institution is the promotion of piety and virtue.”

The cross-cultural work of sociologist Anthony Campolo is instructive in this arena. He has noted that when Japanese mothers today are asked to finish the phrase, “I want my child to be...,” they inevitably answer “successful.” Campolo notes the heavy price Japanese youth have paid in a high-stakes culture where a narrow definition of success (admission to one of a handful of universities) is the only measurement of worth. When Campolo asked American mothers to complete the phrase, inevitably the answer was “I want my child to be...happy.” Have not American youth paid a heavy price as well for this absurdly simplistic but deeply embedded expectation of uninterrupted “happiness”? Surely the hedonistic impulses of youth are not held in check by the expectation of being happy all the time, and such an unrealistic and unachievable expectation leads often to its opposite condition, distress and unhappiness. Schools of integrity are founded and grounded in the assumption that the more sensible hope of parents would be indicated by completing the sentence thusly: “I want my child to be good.” “Goodness” in the sense of

striving for virtue, is, more than anything else, more clearly aligned with achieving success and happiness as side benefits: In fact, seeking happiness or success seldom produces either and almost never both. Seeking goodness, it turns out (from the longitudinal research on independent school grads - *School of Hope* and *Lives of Hope*, Douglas Heath) is aligned not only later in life with good character but also with happiness and success.

What independent schools manage so well is to hire as teachers and staff exemplars of the very virtues the school stands for, then give them license and freedom to teach scholarship and model character. What those very special independent schools, *schools of integrity*, do is well beyond that: these schools center their program on “what we stand for.” Such a deliberate and conscious posture by an entire institution is what distinguishes these schools, and holds them up as models for others.