



## PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR PARENTS AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

To be successful, every independent school needs and expects the cooperation of parents, who must understand and embrace the school's mission, share its core values, and fully support its curriculum, faculty and staff. When joined by a common set of beliefs and purposes, the independent school and its parents form a powerful team with far-reaching positive effects on children and the entire school community.

Working together, parents and school professionals exert a strong influence on children to become better educated; they also help them to mature by modeling adult working relationships based upon civility, honesty and respect.

In practice, the greatest impediment to effective teamwork between independent schools and parents grows out of misunderstandings about school decision-making processes: Who makes decisions in independent schools? How are those decisions made? Independent schools must communicate their procedures to parents who, in turn, share the important responsibility to become informed members of the school community.

### **Parents and the Board of Trustees**

In most independent schools, decision-making authority at the highest level resides in a volunteer Board of Trustees whose membership often includes current parents. The Board of Trustees does not intervene in the daily affairs of the school, such as curriculum development and hiring, evaluating or firing of faculty and staff. Instead, the Board focuses on three areas critical to the success of any independent school: it selects, evaluates and supports the Head of School, to whom it delegates authority to manage the school; it develops broad institutional policies that guide the Head in running the school; and it is accountable for the financial well-being of the school. In the conduct

of its official business, the Board acts only as a whole; individual Trustees, including the Board Chair, have no authority to act unless specifically authorized to do so by the Board acting as a whole.

- ♦ CAIS encourages parents who are interested in high-level decision making to stay informed about the work of the Board of Trustees by reading school publications, talking to the Head of School, and attending appropriate meetings.

- ♦ Parents with concerns about the school or with decisions made by the administration or faculty are encouraged to inquire about and follow the school's review process, but they should not expect the Board of Trustees to act as an appeals board. In a day school, trustees often interact with others within the school community and hear concerns about the daily operation of the school. As a matter of good practice, the trustee reports those concerns to the Head of School.

### **Parents and the Faculty and Administration**

Parents play an essential and positive role in the life of an independent school. Not only are parents advocates for their children, they also support the faculty and administration through extensive volunteer activities and events.

The relationship between parents and the faculty and administration is formally governed by the

school's written enrollment contract and handbook, in which its procedures are spelled out. When parents choose to enroll their child in an independent school, they agree to subscribe to its mission, follow its rules, and abide by its decisions. However, most teachers and administrators would agree that trust and mutual respect are the most essential underpinnings of effective working relationships with parents.

- ◆ CAIS encourages parents to work productively with teachers and administrators by staying informed about their child and important events in the life of the school. Thoughtful questions and suggestions should be welcomed by the school. It is incumbent upon the school to provide parents with timely and pertinent information.

- ◆ Parents best support a school climate of trust and respect by communicating concerns openly and constructively to the teacher or administrator closest to the problem. Efforts by parents to lobby other parents will be viewed by the school as counterproductive.

- ◆ While parents may not agree with every decision made by the school, the parent and school will find, in most cases, enough common ground to continue a mutually respectful relationship. In the extreme case, however, an impasse may be so severe that the parent cannot remain a constructive member of the community. In such cases, both the parent and the school should consider whether another school would be a better match for the family.

### **The Parent Association and the School**

The Parent Association in an independent school provides a vital and much-appreciated service to school leadership and the entire school community. Because the Parent Association is so important, and its volunteer activities potentially so wide-ranging, CAIS recommends the following steps to structure and clarify the Association's role.

- ◆ The Board of Trustees, in consultation with the administration, should develop a set of written by-laws for the Association that make clear its procedures and role as a service organization.

- ◆ The by-laws should clearly state the Association's mission to support the decisions and policies of the Board and administration. The Parent Association neither participates in policy-making by the school nor functions as a lobbying group.

- ◆ The finances of the Parent Association should be supervised and regularly monitored by the school and should be part of the school's annual audit process.

- ◆ The Head of School should be closely involved in the Association nominating process. Cooperation and teamwork between the Head of School and the officers of the Parent Association are crucial to the health of the school community.

- ◆ It is appropriate that the Parent Association advertise its activities and events. However, the Association is not a public relations arm of the school and should play no role in the school's efforts to communicate about itself.

### **CAIS**

*The California Association of Independent Schools is a non-profit organization serving more than 190 member schools and 73,000 students. Founded in 1941, CAIS provides services to member schools including accreditation, conferences and workshops, information and leadership on educational issues. CAIS thanks the Maryland Association of Independent Schools for drafting this statement and making it available to associations.*