

# What do Parents Want from a Boarding School?

## Reflections from a former Head of School



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### PARENTS WANT SIMPLE THINGS.

Parents are sending schools their most prized possession at great financial and huge emotional expense. They want someone to know their child, like their child, and have a plan for getting their child to a specific end.

They want optimism. If we cannot show parents that we believe in their children and that we have a plan which will help them succeed, something is wrong. We get a chance, on a very regular basis, to put these three things in place and, more importantly, to show parents that all three are evident in every interaction.

Once enrolled, a school's first opportunity to show parents these qualities is at the admissions/school handoff on opening day. The second is in the weeks between that handoff and Parents' Weekend, when you are face-to-face with parents again. The third, and hardest, time is right now—those "best intentions" with which each student arrived have long since been overcome by their old habits, the weather is tough, you've been inside for a while, days are shorter, exams are either just over or are upcoming...that's when customer service is most important.

### PARENTS WANT A COMMUNITY PERMEATED WITH A STRONG, DEFINED MISSION.

Everyone on campus should live the school's mission. Some examples:

- I know a plant manager who helped a boy build a loft in his room, making it possible for the student to do something HE wanted to do WITHOUT putting holes in the walls! The manager *could have* said, "No, we've a policy against that." That same individual walked campus every morning and found ways to spruce things up with too few dollars. He did much more than just drive the golf cart on the admissions walk—he led his staff to take pride in the school and made the work they did much more than a job.
- There is a woman in another school's housekeeping department, who knew that Jane wouldn't ever get her clothes to the laundry or even get up on time on Monday morning. She took it upon herself to take Jane a donut AND make sure that the laundry got where it needed to be every Monday. She built a relationship which lasted throughout the three-year career of the student. She could have

complained, moaned, and let the kid live in squalor, but she did something positive.

- The head of a small boarding school makes the rounds at bedtime, and occasionally much later, just to have a presence in the dormitory. The students' first reaction, not surprisingly, was "what the heck is she doing here?!" It became accepted practice fairly quickly, and some students, occasionally, began to miss it when she did not come through because she was off campus. You'd better believe that those kids' parents heard about that head and felt good about it, since they knew that she was "checking up on" their children.

### PARENTS WANT TO KNOW THAT SCHOOLS DO WHAT THEY SAY THEY WILL DO.

They want to be shown evidence that all those things we say in the video, the podcast, the tour, the interview, the publications are true. They need the evidence regularly and passionately and schools demonstrate this by doing the simple things.

A personal story: in addition to being a former head and educational planner, my wife and I are boarding school parents. When we considered sending our younger son off to boarding school, he was in the eighth grade at a very prestigious and excellent day school. No one understood why we would send a child off and pay \$35K (it was a while ago) for a high school education that we could get for free where we were. I was a reasonably well-paid schoolteacher, but a schoolteacher nonetheless, and it took us ten years to pay off that high school education. Clearly, we found something of value in the opportunities we hoped the boarding environment would provide—something more than what we got for free at home. Remember: we are the only industry that regularly asks people to pay significant sums for something they can get for free down the street.

After he had been accepted, we went to the boarding school in question for "revisit day" with the intent of finding some reason NOT to pay the money. We couldn't find one, despite trying very hard. We returned home and I called our older son, who had graduated from the school in question eight years before. He was a young adult, on his own and newly married, so he had perspective. We told him that we thought we might send his brother to boarding school and asked what he thought. He said the following: "I know what an emotional

sacrifice it is for you and mom to have us away, and I know it's expensive, but those were the best four years of my life, bar none. If there's any way for you and mom to swing it, please do."

#### **PARENTS WANT TO KNOW THEIR SACRIFICES ARE WORTH IT.**

That is what parents are looking for. The kind of customer service, on a daily basis—and not, incidentally, without an occasional "skinned knee"—which gets kids to tell their parents how much their financial and emotional sacrifice means.

On November 10th, I had a Facebook message from a former student, now in his early 40s and with a young child of his own. The number 11/10 held a particular meaning for the two of us, as we'd played a one-on-one basketball game when he was in 9th grade. I gave him the ball and 10 points and we played, make it/take it, to 11. I won. On the back of his diploma, I wrote "11-10, Hilly." The gist of his Facebook message to me was a reminder that it was 11/10 and a thank you for "giving me the tools, as a kid, to be a successful adult." When I responded that it was he who had taken the tools that his mother and father had provided when he was 11 and that I had only won a basketball game, his response was that he knew that—and that he thanked his parents for their sacrifice on his behalf all the time. That's what we parents want and the kind of experience for our children we all hope for.

#### **PARENTS WANT A RELATIONSHIP.**

The phone rings at all times of the day and night. E-mail, text, Skype and the like make us available at a moment's notice. If your own child called, you'd answer the phone or text immediately. React as if the response was about your own child. A prompt answer is what brings loyalty, word of mouth referrals, confidence and, in the end, the ability to persevere when you make an error. As in any relationship, you are able to get beyond a temporary setback and continue to move forward because of the level of trust you have built.

#### **PARENTS WANT US TO BE THE BEST VERSION OF OURSELVES.**

We all say we do great work. Think of car companies: each one has the answer to all our needs, do they not? What differentiates? Figure out what you do better than anyone else, do it, and then figure out how you show people that you do.

I believe it comes down to relationships: how we build them, how we continue them both during the enrollment process and after that "admissions handoff." If you can show, not tell, people that you do the job better than anyone else with the students you get, over time you'll reap the benefits of your efforts.

A new, young head of school in New Hampshire had been appointed, but was not yet in place. At her first meeting with the faculty, she asked what they wanted to be. The response was, "We want to be St. Paul's!" The head-designate said, "Wait a minute. There is half a billion dollars difference between St. Paul's and this school. We can't be St. Paul's." She paused and then said the important thing: "But we can be the St. Paul's of small, attentive, third level—not third rate—schools. And, with your help, that's precisely what we are going to become." She went about making that the school's goal and showing anyone who came to campus how that was true.

The reason parents pick a particular boarding school for their child is that they believe that school will know, like, and prepare their child for the future better than any other they have seen. Keep this in mind in everything you do.

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