Factors Affecting Head of School Tenure (FAHST) Study
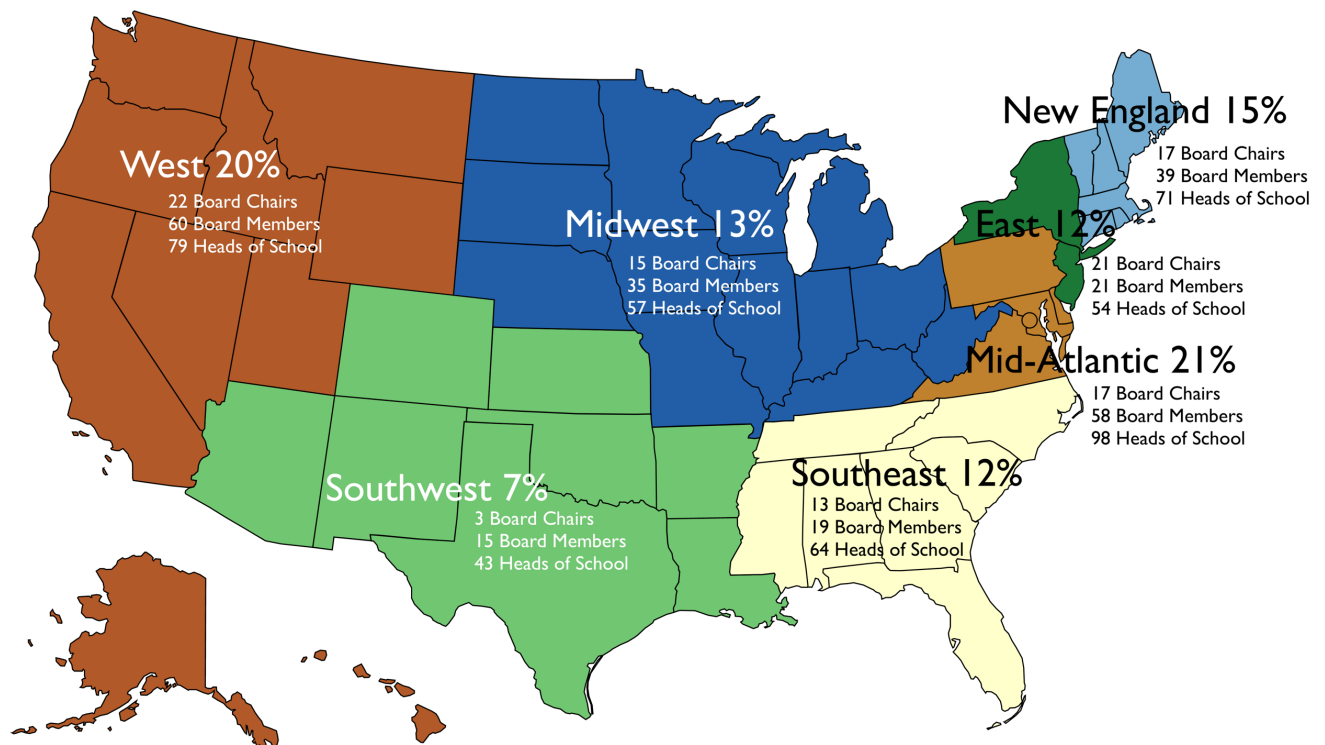
A research collaboration between the National Association of Independent Schools and the University of Pennsylvania

In the spring of 2019, a team of researchers, professors, and administrators (listed on p. 4) from NAIS and U Penn began to study factors that affect the length of time independent school heads remain in their position. Beginning with informal round table discussions, interviews, focus groups, and other stakeholder meetings, as well as a review of recent information available from the NAIS 2018 Governance and Leadership survey and NAIS Data and Analysis for School Leadership (DASL), the team developed a survey for heads, board chairs, and trustees based on themes from these initial sources in May 2019. The Factors Affecting Head of School Tenure (FAHST) survey was distributed in June 2019 to all NAIS member schools. With three demographic questions (discussed below) and 66 other items, including six free-response questions, the survey inquired about the roles of head of school, board chair, and trustee, the relationship between the head and board chair, and governance. The survey was anonymous, but it offered the opportunity for interested respondents to participate in follow-up interviews.

Analysis of survey data began during the summer of 2019, and preliminary findings have been presented in the February 2020 NAIS research report "Head Turnover in Independent Schools" prepared by Margaret Anne Rowe, and the "Support Systems" article by Anne-Marie Balzano, Jay Rapp, Margaret Anne Rowe, and Amada Torres in the Spring 2020 issue of *Independent School*. The following recommendations are based on preliminary findings: clearly articulate the succession plan for the board; onboard new trustees and provide ongoing trustee education; set goals and conduct annual assessments; and address the well-being and work-life balance of the head of school. Peter Horn prepared this display for the presentation at the NAIS Annual Conference on 28 February 2020, while approximately 80 follow-up interviews are beginning to be conducted by 15 U Penn doctoral students. We share these snapshots of preliminary data to inform and encourage continuing conversations about leadership sustainability and a strong future for independent schools.

Demographics of Research Sample

In order to capture the most candid responses possible, the FAHST survey was anonymous, soliciting only demographic data related to the role of respondent (head of school, board chair, or non-chair member of board), region of the U.S. (depicted below), and the number of heads serving the respondent's school in the past decade (one, two, three, or three or more). From the 1600 NAIS member schools, a total of 821 people returned the survey: 466 heads, 108 board chairs, and 247 other trustees. The map shows the distribution of respondents by region (percentage) and role (count).

New England 15%
17 Board Chairs
39 Board Members
71 Heads of School

West 20%
22 Board Chairs
60 Board Members
79 Heads of School

Midwest 13%
15 Board Chairs
35 Board Members
57 Heads of School

East 12%
21 Board Chairs
21 Board Members
54 Heads of School

Mid-Atlantic 21%
17 Board Chairs
58 Board Members
98 Heads of School

Southwest 7%
3 Board Chairs
15 Board Members
43 Heads of School

Southeast 12%
13 Board Chairs
19 Board Members
64 Heads of School

Distribution of Respondents by Number of Heads in the Past Decade and Role

Because this study concerns head tenure and turnover, the survey asked about the number of heads serving each respondent's school in the past decade. Overall, 215 respondents represented schools with a single head during that time; 352 had two; 169 had three; and 85 had more than three. To simplify comparisons and not give undue weight to less-representative categories, the following tables combine respondents whose schools employed three or more heads in the past 10 years.

Number of Heads in the Past Decade	HEAD OF SCHOOL (n = 466)	BOARD CHAIR (n = 108)	BOARD MEMBER (n = 247)
1	126	31	58
2	201	45	32
Three or more	139	32	83

Select Survey Item Responses

In addition to providing more information about the distribution of respondents vis-à-vis turnover in their respective institutions, the table above is intended to aid in interpreting the HoS since 2010 columns in the table below. For ease of comparison, *all findings in the table below are expressed as percentages*. The Agree (%) columns show percentages of total respondents in a given role responding "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" on the survey. For instance, the first cell indicates that 65% of 466 heads agreed *or* strongly agreed with the item Within the board, there is an explicit focus on norms of cooperation and collaboration. The next cell, **77-66-53**, provides cross-section information within this data point, showing that whereas 77% of heads serving a school with only one head in the past decade agreed, 66% of heads at a school with two heads in the past decade agreed, and (only) 53% of heads serving a school with three or more heads in the past decade agreed with this description. The table above will assist those wishing to calculate raw counts.

Survey Item	HEAD OF SCHOOL (n = 466) Agree (%)	HEAD OF SCHOOL HoS since 2010 1(%)-2(%)-3+(%)	BOARD CHAIR (n = 108) Agree (%)	BOARD CHAIR HoS since 2010 1(%)-2(%)-3+(%)	BOARD MEMBER (n = 247) Agree (%)	BOARD MEMBER HoS since 2010 1(%)-2(%)-3+(%)
Within the board, there is an explicit focus on norms of cooperation and collaboration.	65	77-66-53	83	90-82-78	74	71-78-70
Board members accept responsibility for failures and mistakes.	44	57-44-33	78	83-73-78	65	69-61-67
When stakeholders approach board chair with operational concerns, board chair redirects them to head of school and notifies head of school of concern.	81	85-83-74	99	100-98-100	79	83-77-77
Board members understand how and when to redirect stakeholder concerns to head.	67	81-69-53	91	94-87-94	82	76-85-82
Board members understand the most important issues facing the school.	82	89-84-71	94	100-91-94	91	91-94-87
Board members effectively address the most important issues facing the school.	66	78-69-51	91	100-87-88	79	78-81-78

Survey Item	HEAD OF SCHOOL (n = 466)		BOARD CHAIR (n = 108)		BOARD MEMBER (n = 247)	
	Agree (%)	HoS since 2010 1(%)-2(%)-3+(%)	Agree (%)	HoS since 2010 1(%)-2(%)-3+(%)	Agree (%)	HoS since 2010 1(%)-2(%)-3+(%)
Board chair works on ongoing basis with new board members to ensure they understand role in school as it is today.	58	71-57-47	90	90-89-91	63	57-66-63
There is no formal training or support for board chairs related to the role.	51	36-56-59	49	45-56-44	47	40-42-54
After we approve a new board chair we follow an effective transition process.	54	72-51-42	65	71-69-53	64	55-73-59
Head of school has financial training that is adequate or more than adequate for the demands of the role.	76	86-72-73	70	84-69-59	71	79-77-58
Head of school receives adequate support from the board in fundraising efforts, such as annual giving and capital campaigns.	61	75-60-49	85	91-87-75	83	93-86-73
Head of school receives professional support (such as coaching) in areas other than finance beyond the first year in role.	55	55-59-51	82	81-80-88	55	57-57-52
Board sets achievable goals for head.	77	81-77-73	95	100-93-94	90	88-91-92
Head of school and board collaborate on prioritization of annual goals.	77	89-76-67	95	94-98-94	88	90-84-93
Board provides periodic feedback to head on progress in meeting annual goals.	68	80-70-55	94	88-96-94	85	90-88-80
Board gives head of school adequate time to achieve goals.	77	89-79-65	94	97-96-88	92	95-93-89

Excerpts from Free-Response Survey Questions and Initial Follow-Up Interviews

The demands of parents are fierce and constantly changing; it is hard to keep up with them while maintaining a sense of integrity with respect to the mission and values. Faculty and staff are also a very demanding group of people to manage effectively. The head of school goes from one battle to the next and has to have the stamina for it.
—Head of school (survey)

Being a head in the technology/global age is more intense than ever—emotionally, intellectually, and personally exhausting—and the take-it-to-the-next-level mentality that boards adopt (with good intentions) runs us heads ragged.
—Head of school (survey)

Heads of school have the coolest jobs on the planet. If I lose track of that, I need to find something else to do.
—Head of school (survey)

The stress associated with increasing demands of parents and teachers, and to a lesser extent boards, was a factor in my decision (to leave after 13 years). There is an increased level of anxiety among independent school parents today about almost everything, and the expectations in terms of services and outcomes are also rising.

—Head of school (survey)

If the head is not on the same page as the board on strategic work, it simply is not going to work.

—Head of school (survey)

I'm thinking strategically and providing honest feedback, thinking about "What does the school need to be mindful of in the next five years? And then the next 10 years?" so that I model that for trustees, and we partner in not getting involved in the daily affairs of the school.

—Board chair (interview)

Even with board orientations, I feel some board members struggle to understand their role and often fall into the role of representative of the parent community (or one segment of the parent community). They see themselves as parent advocate, not board member.

—Board member (survey)

Governance is the crux of the issue in terms of head tenure. At my school, the board sees board education as a low priority because they are (self-proclaimed) "highly intelligent people" and can "figure it out for themselves." Very few board members have the training, expertise, insight, or time for strategic, generative, and even fiduciary responsibilities.

—Head of school (survey)

Apparently, there are parents who are emailing at 11 o'clock at night and all hours. I try and support the Head, like, "How can we set boundaries?" ... It's such a hard job ... it has always been: you are responsible for your entire staff, for all the children and all the parents. It's always been that job. But tech—I think people thinking that they have to have immediate answers and immediate response is a big stressor.

—Board member (interview)

A collaborative, humble style of leadership will work well ... [Head of school] is a huge, often lonely job, and any human being will do better in a job that big with lots of engaged help and support.

—Board member (survey)

I think trying to manage stress requires a good partner, a confidential partner, someone that you can blow off some steam with, or if an incident at school is highly emotional, feeling that you can express that vulnerability in a safe way is essential.

—Board chair (interview)

There's always the stress of "Am I doing it well enough? Am I doing enough?" That's the stressor.

—Head of school (interview)

FAHST Collaborators

EARL BALL, Senior Fellow and Adjunct Associate Professor, U Penn
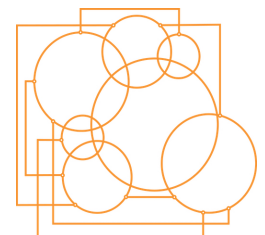ANNE-MARIE BALZANO, Director of Leadership and Governance, NAIS
PETER HORN, Researcher and Consultant, Horn Education Consulting
MICHAEL C. JOHANEK, Director, Mid-Career Program in Ed Leadership, U Penn
JAY RAPP, Vice President of Professional Development, NAIS
MARGARET ANNE ROWE, Research Analyst, NAIS
AMADA TORRES, Vice President for Studies, Insights, and Research, NAIS

DATA DISPLAY BY PETER HORN
Demographic map created with mapchart.net.