



SAIS WHITE PAPER SERIES

Spring 2006

The Art and Science of Raising the Right Questions

Stephen G. Kennedy

Head of School, Trinity School, Atlanta, GA

Forward by

Tom Redmon

Executive Director, Southern Association of Independent Schools, Decatur, GA

A good head of school is supposed to know all the answers. What to teach, whom to hire, how to raise money, where to build the necessary buildings? All these “easy” questions are awaiting the typical answers for the new or older head of school. The answers may not be right, but they will come easy because these questions are so well expected. The answers we’ve learned over the years by experience or by textbook will provide the usual excellence expected by our boards and parents.

But how about some *unusual* excellence? What about some questions that beg more pause than quick answers?

Many of our schools are in the “behind the scenes” business of preparing students to deal with questions of more consequence than might be suggested by ERB’s, the SAT’s, and the college admission essay requirement. Some of our schools are trying very hard to help students develop the ability to ask very hard questions--remarkable, enduring questions that will beg answers that will ensure the quality of our environment, the nature of our social life together, or the capacity of our economic life.

Independent schools have the time and teaching capacity to help students and teaching adults frame very important questions. Such preparation requires expertise at appropriate developmental levels about subjects and objects of consequence to human life. Those asking must understand contexts, history, advancements, politics, and ethical imperatives that surround hidden answers. In this flowering of youth-to-adulthood the arts and the sciences provide fertile ground. The very human act of framing questions becomes essential to education as the beginning of serious inquiry and as a guide to advanced study.

The same holds for our institutions where teaching and learning occur as part of a core business. SAIS spends most of its effort asking questions of our member schools. Some are easy to answer; some are harder. Together we try to perfect the questions in the form of “standards” that allow a diversity of specific responses. How can we be both precise and yet flexible enough to encourage schools to improve in their own unique ways? This question is constantly before our Accreditation Committee. We have to become good at framing questions that will make a difference for schools.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF RAISING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS



Recently, Stephen Kennedy, Head of the Trinity School in Atlanta, gave serious thought to the kinds of questions that must be asked of our schools if our quality is to be assured:

How can we maintain valuable traditions and routines that are beneficial to students, teachers, and parents, while confronting changes and innovations that might prove even more beneficial?

Change for change's sake is pointless and exhausting. But schools can be conservative places that resist what could be valuable improvements for everyone. What are the traditions to hold to, what are the innovations to explore, and how do we structure time – and our own perspective – to discuss them all?

How can we balance the following four time and teaching variables so we maximize everyone's life at school: direct contact time with students in their classes, specials teachers' time with children, planning time for teachers, and break time for teachers and students?

All four cannot function as top priorities without significant conflict and confusion. There is no easy solution, but positive dialogue is required, along with potential sacrifice somewhere. Scheduling is often a win-win-lose scenario, with the wins being those items of high value and the loss – hopefully – being of lesser value.

What is the best way to schedule the day for students and teachers?

Related to the previous question, at heart this has to do with how young children learn, what we want them to learn, how we can best structure the day so learning is optimized, and how long the day should run. The school day is a container for powerful and important traditions; it is also the structure we must question about virtually all our teaching and learning connections with students. A growing question has to do with schooling that is centered on teaching versus schooling that is centered on learning.

How do we balance our time and energy when it comes to two different types of school conversations – one focuses on salary, benefits, evaluation, and related employee issues, and the other focuses on what increases children's learning?

Both are crucial, both deserve attention. With due respect for important compensation issues, however, we can't devote 90% of our discretionary time and energy discussing salary and benefits – and even the business side of our organizations – because 10% isn't enough left to talk about how children and adolescents learn.

How do we balance the needs of any given individual with the needs of the whole community?

One of the toughest challenges in any society is the friction between what the individual wants and needs as one person, and what is ultimately in the group's best interest overall. Trust, respect, and open communication must enter every conversation about this dynamic. At the same time, we have to recognize that the leadership of a school, however consensual and collaborative it might be, must have the courage to move conviction and vision forward.

How do we express concerns, complaints, and questions in ways that do not create a negative climate?

Educator and author Ted Sizer writes in *The Students Are Watching* that, “A community’s functioning rests on trust, and trust comes from the understanding that emerges from dialogue.” It’s important to express conflicts and problems in a way that leads toward resolution. There is a time for listening, for talking, for deciding, and for moving on. As Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “The great thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving.” We in schools need to do an ever and ever greater job of becoming true learning communities.

How do we overcome the traditional, almost adversarial, teacher versus parent model virtually every school has?

If we are ultimately committed to educating each child, we have to build a much closer, more communicative and dynamic relationship between parent and teacher. We talk about “partnering” with parents – what does that mean, do we do it, and do we believe it? If we think of parents as intruders only to be managed on conference days, we miss opportunities in our common goal of teaching and developing strong, intelligent, and creative children and young people. Robert Brooks’ book *Raising Resilient Children* clearly points us in the direction of mutual empathy and respect for the benefit of the child and the adult.

How do we better understand what parents want and need, while not compromising those values we believe are important about children’s education?

Many parents see private education as a service provided for their children’s success in life. How do we help them understand the values we believe particularly crucial for children? Not listening to what is important to parents will not help us, and their not listening to our values will not help parents or society. We may also have to temper some of our own moral judgments about children’s lives, and recognize that parents possess laudable values for their offspring, whether they take the shape we find suitable or not.

How do we create parent education models that give parents more targeted information and more confidence about raising their children?

Parents may look to schools as providing a service for them and their children, but they also look to us as valid resources for their own often anxious parenting. Active parent education programs must go beyond the occasional speaker to embrace perspectives we in schools must better understand. Robert Evans’ book *Family Matters* is an intriguing analysis of contemporary independent school parents. Teachers and parents would do well to sit down together to talk about issues affecting children and young people.

What expectations should we have for each teacher as an adult learner?

We all learn differently, but we all have to be engaged in ongoing, lifelong professional development that keeps us fresh and alert. Independent School Management states that the number one variable in a school’s instructional excellence is a climate that encourages professional growth. In one arena alone, we all need to know more of how the human brain learns, and what implications neurocognitive science has for us. The teacher’s classroom or the administrator’s office cannot be places of escape and isolation, but should be places that cultivate innovation without dishonoring tradition.

What are our expectations for each child – who do we admit, what do we expect once they’re enrolled, what do we do for the ones needing extra support or extra challenge, who do we counsel out and why?

Some of us gravitate toward the top performers; others sympathize with those struggling. Siblings, alum children, children of our school’s employees, diversity families – these and related issues affect not just admissions, but our whole community. In a related vein, have we leaned too far in the

direction of subject matter and performance with our students, and diminished the role of developing learners who are powerful thinkers, doers, and creators?

How do we tend to the individual learner in a class with 15-20 other individual learners?

One of the main challenges facing us in education has to do with looking with greater acuity at each student in a class. How do teachers work with each other and tune into each child in what is ultimately a social, group setting? What more do we all need to know about how the brain works, how the learner learns, and how we can respond to knowledge about learning that grows exponentially? We do know that a one-size-fits-all approach to children – and to adults – just doesn't work.

How do we tend to boys versus how do we tend to girls?

Many experts, including Wendy Mogel, Michael Thompson, and Michael Gurian, have said we are doing a disservice to young boys because we unconsciously expect them to act and learn just like young girls. If that's true, what more do we need to learn in this area? What is our ethical obligation in the area of gender – and in the area of treating each child as a unique individual?

How do we best use technology to advance learning?

The answer isn't simply more and more stuff, and the answer isn't that all the stuff is bad for us. The answer isn't about acquiring more technology, but in how students, teachers, and parents think about and creatively use the technology that is increasingly available to us. In schools we run the risk of falling behind our own students' – and parents' – learning curves. We must ask: Is technology merely a faster typewriter – or does it present us with new paradigms of learning that we are obligated to ponder?

How do we best communicate who and what our school is to our own constituents and to those outside of the school?

We have to have a core understanding of what we are about and how we express it. Though much of the responsibility for this doesn't reside with the classroom teacher, each person in our community has to possess a deeply rooted sense of the values of our school. It's more than marketing – it's connecting with each person, expressing our school culture, and ultimately shaping much of our society's future.

Each of Stephen's questions deserves intensive study. Where will such questions be raised in our schools? How will we involve our parents and trustees in such inquiry? How will administrators and faculty model respect for the well thought out question that as yet has no answer?

Stephen's questions provide good food for thought over the summer as we prepare for the next out-of-ordinary year.

*Visit the SAIS web site and participate in the discussion forum
(for members only) about this White Paper.*

www.sais.org