

# 2003 NAIS Parent Survey

## Executive Summary

### Background

As the national voice of independent pre-collegiate education and as the center of collective action on behalf of its membership, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) conducts surveys of its parent population to strengthen its understanding of independent school parents and what they desire from an independent school education. NAIS last surveyed a segment of private school parents in 1986 as part of an effort to gain insight into what motivates parents to send their children to independent schools and the means they use to finance that education.

The 2003 NAIS Parent Survey seeks to build on that effort by gathering demographic data on independent school parents, their motivations for sending their children to private schools, what they value in an independent school education, and the ways in which they finance their children's education. The study also includes consideration of the services and benefits that independent schools provide, as well as other services in which parents might be interested.

### Research Objectives

Eduventures, an independent research and advisory firm dedicated exclusively to the coverage and service of education and learning markets, conducted the 2003 Parent Survey on behalf of NAIS. NAIS and Eduventures focused the research objectives for the 2003 NAIS Parent Survey on:

- Determining the value proposition of independent schools to parents;
- Identifying the unmet parent needs for which NAIS could provide some potential service(s); and
- Providing data to participating member schools that will help them better serve parents and students.

### Key Findings

The 2003 NAIS Parent Survey results provide clear insights on parent attitudes and opinions regarding independent schools and the value that these schools provide to their children's education. Although this research is largely exploratory in nature and will have to be followed up with more in-depth research in the future, it certainly gives schools and NAIS more information on what motivates parents to choose an independent school education, what they value and how well schools are providing that value, how they finance their children's education, and what other kinds of educationally-related services are of interest.

#### *Choosing an Independent School*

The survey addressed several questions regarding parents' reasons for choosing independent schools for their children. When asked to choose among 16 factors, overwhelmingly parents selected the following as "Important" or "Very Important":

- Academic quality (97%),
- Small class sizes (96%),
- Key student services (e.g., test preparation and college admissions) (75%), and
- Low satisfaction with the public school system (72%).

Less significant factors were:

- Religious affiliation (7%),
- Financial aid received (17%),
- Tuition cost (20%), and
- Discipline reasons (27%)

The results further indicate that, although parents do not necessarily send their children to the same schools that they attended, whether or not they themselves attended an independent school is a factor in their choosing an independent

school. Over 50 percent of respondents indicate that at least one parent had attended an independent school.

### ***The Value Proposition***

The survey was primarily designed to measure what respondents value in an independent school education from both academic and non-academic standpoints, as well as probe into what parents believe should be a school's financial priorities. Among the academic factors identified by parents as "Important" and "Very Important" are:

- Technology/computer skill development (68 percent),
- Small class sizes (66 percent),
- Community service programs (66 percent), and
- Advanced placement programs (61 percent)

One of the most significant conclusions to be drawn from the research is the great value that parents place on independent school teachers. When asked to prioritize use of independent school funds, 97 percent of parents rated high quality faculty and staff as the number one priority. In fact, school investment in high quality faculty and staff significantly outranked other key areas of school budgets (e.g., school facilities) in terms of perceived value for parents. More than half of the surveyed parents (51 percent) also identified teacher salaries as the leading area of school investment in need of greater attention by schools. In addition, 36 percent of respondents indicated that schools may not be spending enough on labs and other science facilities.

Parents also place importance on key external (non-school-based) metrics of performance (e.g., standardized testing, college admissions) to measure their satisfaction with their child's independent school education. Over 88 percent of surveyed parents rated college placement services as "Important" or "Very Important" and 84 percent rated preparation for standardized testing likewise. Parents also place significantly higher importance on college placement services and standardized testing preparation than on other services or benefits provided by a school, suggesting that parents are more highly attuned to the significance of standardized testing and college admissions in their child's education than other aspects of the academic experience.

Parents recognize that their children derive value from the non-academic aspects of the independent school experience as well. Factors identified by parents as "Important" and "Very Important" to their children's independent school experience include:

- A strong arts program (91 percent),
- A safe school campus (90 percent),
- A school's athletics (84 percent), and
- Extracurricular activities (83 percent).

Psychological and social counseling were not ranked as highly by parents (44 percent).

Approximately three quarters of parents surveyed expressed that there are no additional services that their children's independent schools should offer. However, it is notable that a quarter of the parents expressed interest in their children's independent schools offering additional services, with specific interest in consulting services and publications.

### ***Financing an Independent School Education***

The largest concentration of respondents (73 percent) in the 2003 NAIS Parent Survey reported spending between \$10,000 and \$19,999 in average annual tuition costs for their child's independent school education, while less than 20 percent of parents indicated that tuition costs exceed \$20,000 per year. Parents surveyed indicated annual tuition increases of less than \$2,000 per year, with more than 45 percent of parents averaging between \$1,000 and \$1,999 in additional tuition costs annually. Beyond the cost of tuition, parents incur additional costs for school supplies, books, and field trip costs. However, the bulk of the respondents (more than 75 percent) indicated that this was less than \$2,500 annually.

While less than one-quarter of the respondents reported receiving financial aid to help cover the costs of their children's education, many reported using other sources and/or payment plans to help finance the costs. Nearly 20 percent reported using some sort of monthly payment plan, 10 percent said they received help from friends or relatives, and

over 5 percent reported borrowing from a bank or local credit union.

### ***School Financing Priorities***

The survey posed several questions to parents regarding their perception of independent schools' spending decisions. As stated earlier, parents believe that independent schools should place high quality faculty and staff (97 percent) as the highest priority in their budgeting. Secondly, surveyed parents believe that academic resources (80 percent) should also be of high importance. On the other hand, parents expressed that areas such as school services, school facilities, and extracurricular activities are less important factors in their children's independent schools' budgeting decisions.

The survey also probed into the possible elasticity of class size and tuition. When asked about their sensitivity to additional students per class, only 17 percent of respondents thought that raising class size by more than one student would compromise the value of a class. However, this sensitivity to class size changes varies considerably with parents – the value inflection point for some parents is one student, and for others it is five.

While parents did not demonstrate definitive sensitivity to the elasticity of class size, overall parent responses indicate that the class size limit is approximately 20 students. This suggests that class size may be an area for schools to generate additional revenue growth. However, in order for schools to better understand the issue of sensitivity to the elasticity of class size, further research and analysis is needed at the school level to generate data that can be more accurately applied to individual school planning and decision-making processes.

Survey respondents exhibited a similar response pattern when asked about their sensitivity to tuition increases per year. Parents reported a wide range of additional dollar amounts that would make their children's independent school education unaffordable, ranging from less than \$1,000 to more than \$5,000.

The lack of definitive parent responses to questions about tuition increases suggests that tuition also may be an area for schools to generate additional revenue growth. However, as in the case of class size, further research and analysis is needed at the school level.

### **Methodology**

The 2003 NAIS Parent Survey was conducted through a web-based questionnaire tool from June 3<sup>rd</sup> through June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003. The survey included independent school parents with e-mail access and with at least one child attending one of the 15 participating schools.

Parent e-mails included an introduction to the survey project and provided instructions and a unique web link for accessing the set of 54 questions. Parents were permitted to access the survey as many times as necessary to complete it. However, they could gain access only through the computer that was used to start the survey in order to prevent access by non-qualifying respondents. Parent e-mail addresses were provided to NAIS and Eduventures by the participating schools. Parents were told that the survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete and that their responses would remain anonymous.

The schools participating in the survey agreed to provide access to their current parent populations in exchange for access to aggregated survey data specific to their school. While 11 schools agreed to directly provide contact information for parents to NAIS and Eduventures, four schools, in adherence with school privacy policies, elected to distribute surveys to their parents on their own.

### **Survey Sample and Response Data**

The 2003 NAIS Parent Survey was exploratory in nature and may not be representative of all parents with children in independent schools. However, NAIS member schools can draw important lessons from attitudes and opinions of parents at the 15 participating independent schools, as these schools possess characteristics that are representative of the larger national organization. The results and conclusions from the survey can also serve as a basis from which further research and analysis can be conducted at the individual school level.

A total of 4,760 parents were contacted for the 2003 NAIS Parent Survey. 722 surveys were completed by parents and collected for the study, resulting in an overall survey completion rate of 15.2 percent.

	<b>Total</b>	<b>% Households Contacted</b>
Households Contacted	4760	-
Surveys Accessed	1274	26.8%
Surveys Completed	722	15.2%
Surveys Partially Completed	539	11.3%
Survey Screen Outs	13	0.3%

Schools participating in the 2003 NAIS Parent Survey were grouped into two main segments to help assess the presence of potential bias in the survey response data. The two main segments used to assess the condition of the survey data, included "School Type" and "School Gender." Parent response data were sorted according to both strata and resulted in a good overall representation of the larger NAIS membership.

<b>School Type</b>	<b>2003 NAIS Parent Survey Respondents</b>	<b>NAIS Membership</b>
Boarding	1%	3%
Day	77%	77%
Mix Boarding-Day	22%	20%

  

<b>School Gender</b>	<b>2003 NAIS Parent Survey Respondents</b>	<b>NAIS Membership</b>
All Boys	7%	7%
All Girls	10%	7%
Co-Educational	83%	86%

Source: [www.nais.org](http://www.nais.org). © 2003, National Association of Independent Schools.