



Manifesting the Mission of Independent Schools: An Interview with Dr. Michael Pratt, Head of BRENTWOOD SCHOOL

A native of Virginia, Dr. Michael Pratt leads the renowned Brentwood School in Los Angeles. Over his career, Dr. Pratt has served a number of institutions as a teacher, department chair, NEH program officer, Academic Dean and, for the last 8 years, as Head of School at Brentwood.

We asked Dr. Pratt to comment on the challenges faced by independent schools, and how he ensures that his school's various constituents optimally support the strategies developed by Brentwood's board, professional and faculty leaders.

America's more than 33-thousand private elementary and secondary schools, with more than 5 million students, are facing challenges – and not just financial challenges. Parental expectations are high. Schools need a diverse student and teacher population to fulfill their mission and they need to embrace the sometimes conflicting needs of their communities. Technology is changing at a rapid clip, and that requires rethinking, retraining and investing in renewed infrastructure. Motivating students is always a challenge, and there can be legislative obstacles and financial issues to overcome.

The life of a head of an independent school is not dull, particularly during these challenging times. In Hawaii, where independent school enrollment dropped by 2.3%, the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools warned that its member schools "must adapt" and "do more with less". This call to action is all too common, as reflected in the Independent School Chairperson's Association 2009 Conference, which focused on strategies for ensuring that independent schools remain viable in the long-term. In Memphis where attrition has severely impacted independent schools, the Memphis Business Journal writes, "Blame it (the attrition) on the econo-

my and parents needing to cut expenses. Or blame it on some public schools remaking themselves into more desirable education options. Or blame it on all of the above."

At Brentwood School in West Los Angeles, Head of School Dr. Michael Pratt knows these challenges well. Reflecting on this 28 year career, Pratt observes, "Over the years I have grown to understand at a deep level how critical it is to manifest our mission in every aspect of the school. We must ensure that every decision is made in a way that will further the mission. It can be an academic decision, or a decision on athletics; it can be about the logistics of transporting a student or how we respond to the input of parents; it can be about finance and fundraising, or how we maintain the school's physical infrastructure. Every member of this school needs to consistently think about our students, our role in their lives and how we impact the community. If we do that, then we keep this school strong."

"It all starts with the mission..."

Pratt believes that being clear about the mission and communicating that mission is a critical starting point for manifesting the mission. "The mission of independent

schools can be similar, but each thinks of itself differently and each has its own culture. The mission interacts with the people, school culture and the tenor of the times, and out of that comes action."

Brentwood's Statement of Purpose clearly states:

"Brentwood School is a vibrant and diverse community whose purpose is to promote personal and intellectual growth. We provide challenging, engaging programs in a nurturing learning environment, devoting care and attention to every student. Embracing high standards of character, commitment, and achievement, Brentwood School encourages students to think critically and creatively and to act ethically."

"I can not count the times that we have gone over each and every sentence, phrase and word as we have developed our plans and charted our course of action." Pratt cites the creation of a school master plan. "There was a time when these sorts of issues were developed by a small group of administrators and a handful of trustees. In fact, I heard a horror story about another school where a new theater was built and the theater teacher was never even consulted!"

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In contrast to such an autocratic approach, when Pratt and the board created the school master plan, they involved all school constituents in a 30 member team that served as both a kind of master planning think tank and as a group that could generate support. "It increased the flow of good ideas exponentially" remarks Pratt. "The planners were made aware of issues and concerns, and gained insights that they wouldn't otherwise have had. This came about because our Statement of Purpose enjoins us to create '...a nurturing learning environment, devoting care and attention to every student.' We take this seriously, and the requirement to think about every student meant we needed to consider every viewpoint. Open, transparent governance generates better results at every turn."

Pratt cites other examples of how Brentwood School manifests the mission.

"In the classroom our curriculum highlights authentic issues that connect to students' lives. The current economic crisis, for example, offers a real-time foundation to give meaning to studies in American History of the Great Depression."

Part of the school's mission is diversity and Pratt is constantly aware of the school's stated need for diversity within the student body – a challenge many independent schools face. "In many independent schools, the student population looks like dumbbells, with a bulge of students on one end who need financial support, a narrow middle class, and a bulge on the other end of students from families who are very well off," he comments. "No independent school without a massive endowment has solved this problem, but we keep trying to find a better approach. We never stop trying to think of innovative solutions to enhance diversity of experience, thought, economic background, ethnicity and views."

Engaging Staff in the Mission

When it comes to implementing the mission, one of the most predominant and delicate issues is personnel. In Pratt's view, it doesn't

matter how large or small, how well-funded, whether the school is urban, suburban or rural – faculty and staff must be aligned with the mission. "Schools have a delicate social fabric. On the one hand schools are not a business, on the other they have a bottom line. But they have a different kind of bottom line, more like a church or a family. This has some important ramifications when it comes to how you build and treat your staff."

He continues, "You have to assess whether staff, faculty and administration are well aligned with the mission. If they are not, are they in a position to be developed? And if not, can you move them out of the organization in a way that they retain their dignity and move on to find a different organization where they are better aligned?"

In discussing how to manifest the mission when it comes to staff, Pratt notes that "...letting teachers or staff go is never easy. In this kind of close-knit environment, everyone has friends and supporters. And too much turmoil can be damaging." But in the end, he says, "It is an absolute drag on the operation if the wrong people are there. It is demoralizing to high performers to have underperformers remain."

Working with the Community

Outside the boundary of the school, Pratt is well versed in the necessity and challenges of creating good will and support in the community. "Many independent schools operate under a conditional use permit, and they must have permission of the surrounding community to operate. An ongoing challenge is to meet the needs of the students, and also do it in a way that is palatable for the surrounding community."

Brentwood School provides educational services to K-12 students on two campuses, and is uniquely positioned within a highly educated and affluent community. "In addition to our relations with the community, we have very complex social relationships. We are answerable to three jurisdictions – the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles and the federal government."

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Pratt cites the example of the school's athletic facilities, which occupies 22 acres of property owned by the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration. "We were able to develop an enhanced sharing agreement with the VA in which we improved the land and now occupy it. We also have service learning projects with the VA. By developing win-win solutions, we have created a close relationship and happily a very positive one."

As Pratt looks out over the future development of the school, he and the Board are constantly considering the school's impact on the community, "Traffic in Los Angeles is always a great concern. As we plan for the future we want to have a positive impact on congestion and not a negative impact. We made a commitment that we would actually decrease the traffic flow over what it is currently, this despite the fact that we are working toward an increase in students." In addition, they determined that in developing new facilities Brentwood would be as "green" as possible, limiting their carbon footprint. "Thinking about the needs and views of the community conveys something important. Being a good citizen generates support, and it is one of the important things that we do that helps us to be successful."

Engaging Parents

All schools, private or public, feel the pressure of engaging and dealing effectively with parents. "One of the lessons I learned the hard way was that you have to communicate with parents ten times more than you think. One can never fully anticipate what you might have missed," Pratt notes, "and telling parents something once is simply not enough."



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You have to keep coming back at every opportunity and communicate and earnestly engage their support. If you want parents aligned with your mission and philosophy, you need to make the effort every single day."

Getting parents actively involved, yet ensuring that the philosophy and competence of educators is respected, is no small task for a Head of School. "There is a creative tension in wanting to be partners with parents. We can do the best possible job when parents and the school work together to bring out the best in a child. The last thing anyone wants to do is stiff arm parents, or strong arm teachers and administrators." Pratt continues, "We hope that parents understand and respect our expertise in the field, and we certainly need their support in order to create a home environment that is conducive to learning. All of this takes a lot of engagement and respectful communication on all sides."

Manifesting the Mission in Hard Times

Pratt sees a tendency to sometimes view education as a commodity, particularly when money is tight. "For children, education is not just a process in the way that going to work is a process for adults. Going to school is an experience and an emotional journey. It is about relationships and learning. Thinking about education in the same way as work, in terms of financial cost and bottom line test scores, is just not healthy for children, for parents or for schools."

In Pratt's view this has important consequences for leadership. "Leadership in an organization that needs to educate children, address community concerns, cultivate an exceptional faculty and gain the support of parents is more persuasive than authoritarian. Ultimately, the rubber meets the road in the classroom. And to ensure ongoing success, everyone has to be aligned with the mission. It can't be dictated. Building consensus is essential."

Whether as a single-gender school, a

50-student independent school in Iowa, or a well-endowed private school in California, the challenges of independent schools in the 21st Century continue.

"There are no easy answers. All I would say is that the starting point for all independent schools is the mission. If you think about the mission then you will care for the students and develop suitable support from parents, faculty and the community. This, along with responsible financial management, will ensure that independent schools have a strong future." ❖