

Supporting the First Family

Understanding the challenges that first families face and preparing for a smooth transition

By Lynn Friedman and Barbara Bassett

Why you should pay attention to the first family's needs

Heads do their best work when their families are thriving. Once families are comfortable in the new environment, heads are free to focus on the concerns of their school. Conversely, heads whose partners are unhappy or whose children are having social or academic difficulties must make them a top priority. And, if their families' needs are compelling, these heads may search for another position.

In short, happy families lead to happy heads. Unhappy families can culminate in head turnover.

Headship is an exciting and challenging task. But even with significant support from a partner, the head faces a major challenge when entering a new school: to quickly establish credibility as a strong and competent leader while simultaneously ensuring his or her family members safe passage in their new environs.

This is a daunting task for three reasons: the kind of person who is drawn to headship, the nature of the job, and the needs and pressures associated with being a member of the first family.

1. The kind of person who is drawn to independent school headship. Heads are hard-working people with a great capacity for empathy and a genuine concern for the community. Although these may be wonderful qualities in a leader and in a partner, they leave the first family open to special challenges.

People who are drawn to headships often tend toward workaholicism. Moreover, when faced with great pressure, they sometimes manage their anxiety by working even harder. Many view headship as a "secular ministry" and see themselves as answering "the call." Certainly, you will never hear a head say, "It's just a job!" Heads extend themselves for others, at times subordinating the needs of their own family to the needs of the school community.

2. The nature of independent school headship. Heads are not always hired just because the incumbent head is retiring. Rather, with increasing frequency, they are brought in to replace a head who has, officially or unofficially, been discharged. New heads may face unrealistic, impossibly high expectations. They may be expected to effortlessly fix heretofore irresolvable organizational problems without making anyone uncomfortable or unhappy—and to be available at all times.

To make matters more difficult, heads are not always alerted to individual and organizational problems prior to assuming the headship. Prudence dictates that, early on at least, heads keep their own counsel. During this period of transition, heads and the members of their families must be consummate diplomats, refraining from criticism and building good relations with as many people as possible in their new home.

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It is into this delicate, high-demand, high-expectation context that your head brings his or her loved ones. The head needs support from them, but they are not without their own needs and feelings.

3. The needs and pressures associated with being a member of a first family. As anyone who has ever relocated can tell you, moving a family, no matter what the reason, is never easy. It requires considerable adjustment on the part of all family members.

Upon moving, the head is immediately catapulted into the exciting challenges of the new job. In contrast, sometimes by design and sometimes by happenstance, the partner is left to deal with the transition. Although the decision to accept the headship may have been a family one, that does not mean it was achieved without ambivalence. The spouse or partner may, albeit perhaps unconsciously, have lingering feelings of resentment about the sacrifices inherent in such a move.

Once settled, the head's spouse may be expected to work tirelessly, without compensation or recognition. This may include entertaining, hosting overnight guests, and appearing at an array of campus events. If he or she fails to comply with these expectations and misses a significant event, he or she may be the object of criticism. Still worse, the expectations may never have been made explicit. Certainly, there is no training for these tasks. Even a partner who is devoted to being a member of the "supporting cast" is not exempt from envy, criticism, and people with less-than-pristine agendas.

Children can add more stress and demands on parents already in a difficult situation. They may be leaving a place where they have been happy. Some may have special social, learning, athletic, musical, or extracurricular needs. Both parent and child may be very apprehensive about shifting to a new school that may not be as effective in addressing those needs. But, even when a move is clearly for the better, uncertainties always exist. It is difficult for parents dealing with their own moving challenges to have to deal with their children's apprehensive, angry, or resentful feelings.

To these three factors—heads' own tendency to be workaholics, the tough circumstances in which some new heads find themselves, and the pressures of moving on families—add this unfortunate paradox. At a time when a family is at its most vulnerable, its members may have to make the hardest adjustment of all: learning to tolerate public scrutiny. Suddenly, the partner is not merely a partner. The children are not merely children. Rather, they are now members of the first family, always expected to be on their best behavior.

What can the board do?

Being aware of the pressures your first family faces is an important first step. Beyond this, there are specific actions you can take, as a matter of policy and practice, to ensure a smooth transition.

1. Work with the first family to create policies that respect the need for privacy and for family time. If the head's home is on campus, such guidelines might specify a "call first, always" policy for anyone considering dropping by. Policies should address how late and how early one may call as well as circumstances under which the head may be contacted on weekends and holidays.

2. Recognize that every first family has the need to come first sometimes. Work with the new head to take the necessary steps to ensure that this can happen.

3. Don't assume that the residence of the first family will function as the campus hotel unless that is part of the written contract and the partner has adequate household assistance.

4. Create supportive structures for the first family. Provide excellent health and mental health family insurance coverage. If school policy limits this type of care, find another way to fund it. This is critically important since the stresses placed on members of the first family make them more vulnerable to mental health difficulties.

The head's partner

1. Bring the partner to campus prior to tendering an offer.

2. Tell the head and partner, before they accept your offer, whether the appointment is a "package deal." If so, spell out the specifics of the package. There are probably no right or wrong head/spouse job configurations. Different structures work well in each setting and for each family. But it is essential that expectations be explicitly articulated as a part of the job offer.

Consider creating a written job description for the head's partner. Is the partner expected to entertain? If so, is there an entertainment budget? Is there a decorating budget? Is the first family expected to entertain overnight guests? If so, is there a budget for household help? Will the partner be compensated for these activities? Is the partner free to refuse without repercussion?

3. Address the spouse's career needs. If the spouse is leaving a job, provide all possible assistance to help find a comparable position in your locale. Establish partnerships and reciprocal agreements with local industry and academic institutions for this purpose. This will not only make it easier to recruit a new head, but it will also reveal the board and the community as both savvy and welcoming. (Note that these same contacts can be used to help faculty spouses get jobs.)

4. Introduce the partner to people in the school as well as in the larger community. Talk with him or her about interests, needs, and goals, and try to help make useful connections.

5. Offer information about the new community. Provide the names of doctors and other professionals. In addition, give information about restaurants, grocery stores, and related topics.

6. Welcome the partner into the community as an individual, not just a trailing spouse. Include him or her in events. Don't embarrass the partner by digging for information about the head or treating him or her as an appendage.

The first children

1. Pay to bring the entire family to town prior to the move. To generate excitement about the change, arrange for the head's children to meet other children (both at the school and in the larger community). Show them interesting things for someone their age in the school and in the community.

2. Remember that, ideally, first families should be free to choose the optimal school for their children without having to account to anyone for the choice. To expect

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otherwise can create a host of complicated feelings and resentments on the part of all involved.

3. If children are expected to attend their parent's school, learn about any special needs prior to the move. Typical needs could include learning specialists, psychologists, or tutors. Then anticipate the budgetary impact of such needs. It is important to evaluate whether the school is academically appropriate.

If the children are not expected to attend the school, is tuition assistance available so that they can attend another independent or parochial school? It is advantageous to have reciprocal agreements with other independent schools in the area for this purpose.

4. Without asking questions, discreetly make information available about health, learning, and psychological resources.

The head

1. Recognize that this is a challenging position and a stressful time. Take steps to reduce the stress. Provide health club memberships or similar supports.

2. Encourage the head to seek out organizational consultation so that he or she can reduce the stress of transition. Make funds available for this purpose.

What your efforts reveal about your school

Attending to the needs of the first family says to them, "Welcome. We care about you. We care about your needs. You are a part of our community. Unpack your bags. Stay awhile."

Similarly, these efforts send a powerful message to the school: "We mean it when we talk about community. We respect and support the institution of the family—whatever that means to you." It is a message that everyone will remember in the future if faculty and students find themselves facing their own family struggles. They will view the school community as an accepting place where they, in turn, can find support. ■

This is adapted from "First Families: A Toolkit for Trustees," available in its entirety in the Resources and Statistics section of www.nais.org. The NAIS annual meeting offers numerous activities designed for first families. To learn more, check www.nais.org under Conferences and Programs, or e-mail your inquiries to the conference staff at NAISconf@nais.org.

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