

Head of School, Know Thy Neighbors

Why You Should Get out of the Office and Meet Your Neighboring Non-Independent School Colleagues

by Roger Weaver

In the early 1980s, Paul Cummins, the founding headmaster of Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences, a K–12 independent school in Santa Monica, California, did something simultaneously counterintuitive and completely obvious: he took out the Yellow Pages, started calling the principals of nearby public schools, and arranged to visit them, one after another. Today, a direct result of Paul’s conversations with local principals is that more than 11,000 students in underserved public schools in the Los Angeles area and California’s central valley annually receive fully funded, yearlong, hands-on, in-school arts programs delivered by professional teaching artists.

About a decade later, I became headmaster of Crossroads after serving for 10 years as assistant headmaster to Paul. For many years, our school’s community involvement continued to focus on strengthening and growing the public school arts education program we had initiated. But one day, having learned from Paul the value of reaching out to neighboring schools, I decided to visit a small Catholic K–8 school two blocks away from Crossroads that I had been driving by for years but knew absolutely nothing about. The direct result of that visit is that today there are volunteers from a consortium of area independent schools who have quite literally saved this school from closure, and the 175 children enrolled there, 70 percent of whom are living below the federal poverty index, have a sustainable educational community in which to learn and grow.



ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

Paul’s decision to find out what was going on in the public schools around him and my decision to visit a neighboring Catholic school were not based on either one of us looking for ways to fill vast colonnades of leisure time in our schedules, or from a lack of things on our to-do lists. Nor were they based on a perception that Crossroads had an excess of resources to meet the needs of our own young and growing school.

Independent schools are increasingly placing significant priority on community service and understand the important messages about social and personal responsibility that these programs convey to our students, along with the invaluable hands-on, real-world experience that they get in community service work. And while student community service is certainly an important part of what goes on in independent schools, if we are truly going to walk our talk with respect to the importance of community service, we need to do something more,



something that students and parents can see as evidence of our schools own institutional commitment in this area.

The Art of Connection

One of the things that commonly make independent school heads bridle is the fact that, in the news media, the words “independent school” (or more commonly “private school”) are almost without exception preceded by either the word “elite” and “exclusive.” The problem with these epithets, of course, is not that they were conferred out of malice, but that historically they have been earned. If we don’t like them, then we need actually to do something about it. Institutional community service is one of the things we can do about it. Having our students go out and do community service work is good and appropriate and a valuable teaching tool, but it is not enough. Urban independent schools in particular have extraordinary networks of people and other resources that enable them to be part of a bigger picture of education, part of a solution to the pervasive educational affliction of under-funded, undervalued, overloaded, and chronically struggling schools, of which there are far too many.

When Paul Cummins started visiting the public schools around Crossroads, he was the first independent school head any of the principals had ever met, and certainly the first to set foot on any of their campuses. He initiated these visits because he felt woefully ignorant about his educational neighbors, and he was interested in seeing if there were any ways in which Crossroads and these schools might collaborate to the benefit of each. When he started down this path, he did not have a destination in mind, but where it led him and the schools that ultimately became involved in his initiative is an interesting example of the power of exploring possibility when impulse and opportunity and some good fortune align.

When Paul Cummins started visiting the public schools around Crossroads, he was the first independent school head any of the principals had ever met, and certainly the first to set foot on any of their campuses.

In learning about his neighboring public schools, Paul was immediately struck by two things: how segregated they were and the virtually complete absence of the arts. Since Paul was the founder of a school with diversity and the arts as two of its five founding core values, this made an impression on him. He realized that there was not a lot he could do about their enrollment profile, but when he learned in one elementary school that its choral teacher’s funding had been cut (the school’s only arts program), he offered to “lend” the school the Crossroads choral teacher for an after-school program. Eighty kids showed up. The principal subsequently asked if the program could

be offered during the day, and at that point Paul had the Crossroads development office pursue and secure a small grant from the American Express Foundation sufficient to fund a part-time choral instructor during the regular school day.

Shortly after, Paul was at a Crossroads new family potluck dinner and got into a conversation with a group of parents about the dire state of the arts in public schools. He told the story of the choral teacher in the public elementary school, and one of the new parents took him aside later in the evening and asked if a substantial grant would enable a comprehensive music, dance, drama, and visual arts program to be put into the school. That parent was musician Herb Alpert, who made an initial “life changing” gift and then subsequently provided additional strong support to what became the Crossroads Community Outreach Foundation, and its major project, which is now its own independent 501(c)3, known as PS Arts. Now in its 20th year, PS Arts annually provides fully funded arts programs to over 11,000 students in 24 Title I public schools. Its over \$2 million annual operating budget comes entirely from contributed funds.

Because Crossroads has service to the greater community as one of its five founding core values, it made sense to create a legally separate nonprofit entity to seek funding for our public outreach work. Among other things, this enabled us to seek grants from individuals, corporations, and foundations that would not support an independent school, or whose charters excluded directly supporting precollegiate education.

Support by Consortium

When I became headmaster of Crossroads, I was committed to carrying on the outreach work of the Crossroads Community Outreach Foundation (CCOF), and I was particularly interested in finding a way to engage other schools in the area in the effort. I found that way a few blocks from the Crossroads campus. Saint Anne School was founded in 1908 with a commitment to “exercising a preferential option for the poor” by providing affordable quality education regardless of the family’s capacity to pay tuition. In the early years of the K–8 school, migrant farm workers from Mexico worked side-by-side with those from Oklahoma and the Southern states as their children studied together in the school. This school today has a population of 175 students — a mix of Latino, African American, Asian American, and white students. I was very surprised to discover that even though Saint Anne is a Catholic school, it receives very little funding from the Los Angeles Archdiocese. The formula used to allocate financial support to diocesan schools is based on the median income of the community in which

the school exists. Because Santa Monica's median income is relatively high, Saint Anne gets minimal funding from the archdiocese.

The result of this is that Saint Anne is the only nonpublic Title I school in Santa Monica, and an average of 70 percent of its students qualify for federal food programs under the poverty index criteria. Its financial picture is made even more challenging because the founding philosophy of the school requires that flexible, affordable tuition means reduced payment obligations for families with multiple children. The consequence of this, of course, is that the larger the number of students from a single family, the smaller the income per student. The already minimal fee structure of \$3,400 per year for one student decreases with each family member to \$2,300 per year per student for a family with four children attending. The long and the short of it is that Saint Anne School is under the most severe financial circumstances of any educational institution in our community and is in far worse shape financially than even the most severely under-funded public schools.

The reality of Saint Anne was quite an eye-opener for me, and I immediately saw their situation as an obvious one around which to attempt to rally support from a group of neighboring independent schools. The clear needs of this school made a compelling case for a collaborative institutional community service effort, so I began calling my friends and colleagues in surrounding independent schools, explaining the circumstances of Saint Anne School, and asking if they would join a group effort to support this at-risk community resource. I had learned that Saint Anne, at that time, was looking at a \$60,000 annual operating budget deficit. I purposefully did not ask for money; what I asked each school to do was "contribute a person" — either a trustee, a parent, a staff member, or a friend of the school — who would be willing to sit on the Saint Anne development advisory group with the specific goal of using their contacts, connections, and personal network to raise \$60,000 a year in support of the school. I argued that some focused, thoughtful, volunteer assistance would have a reasonable chance of raising the relatively modest sum of \$60,000 each year to support the operations of this extraordinary educational institution. Nine schools and a local hospital that heard about the idea agreed to join the effort, and the Saint Anne Support Council was born.

Initially, the Saint Anne Support Council received guidance and support from CCOF. Now the Support Council operates very independently, and when its members actually came to understand the school and see what it was doing with its students and families, they became so committed and passionate about the work that

they far exceeded anyone's wildest hopes for what they could achieve. In the last four years, for example, the Saint Anne Support Council has raised over \$760,000 for the school. Michael Browning, the incredibly dedicated principal of Saint Anne School said recently, "The impact of the Support Council has been immeasurable; it is the single biggest reason the school is in existence today. Without it, the school would have closed two years ago."

The Benefits of Outreach

There also turned out to be an unanticipated but significant benefit to Crossroads as a result of the various community initiatives we have undertaken. During my tenure as headmaster, we were able to purchase land and develop an elementary school campus and K–12 sports center two blocks from our main campus. The fund-raising portion of that project totaled \$14 million. As the primary fund-raiser in that effort, I was very interested to see that, without exception, every major gift we received in that campaign was accompanied by some version of "I am happy to support this project, but I want you to know that I would not be making this level of commitment if you were not doing what you are out in the community."

There are so many good reasons for independent schools to get personally and directly involved with the educational environment around them. It is good modeling for students, there is an enlightened self-interest return on the effort invested, and, most importantly, it is the right thing to do. And when independent schools begin to develop a reputation for community engagement, a subtle but important shift begins to occur in three important areas: admissions, hiring, and board recruitment. As that plays out, the understanding of and support for a public purpose commitment increases among families in the school, professional staff, and the board of trustees. Now the school is moving toward a really interesting paradigm shift in the purposes and purviews of independent education.

The students in our schools get so much, and yet if you are in an urban area there are probably other children within a mile or two of you who get so little. If you have read Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, this is not news to you (and if you haven't read it, you need to). Independent schools cannot undo all the social, economic, and political reasons that education is failing so many of our young people, but we do not have to be part of the problem. Quality education is a social justice issue, and we all need to take measure of our institutions and ask ourselves what we can do to be part of the solution. The schools around you probably won't reach out to you. They assume you don't care. Prove them wrong.

ROGER WEAVER, the former headmaster of Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences (California), is the president of The Weaver Group, a consulting firm for organizations and leaders.