



National Association
of Episcopal Schools
Excellence Through Association

Executive Summary

An Investigation of Support Resources for Heads of Color to Promote Well-Being, Persistence, and Retention

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Problem of Practice

There is an increased overall demand for individuals to serve as Heads of independent schools amidst an ongoing wave of retirements, diminishing average tenures of Heads of school, and unexpected turnovers in Headship (Rowe, 2023). Despite the increasing non-white demographics within schools, diversifying school leadership remains a formidable challenge for independent schools (Frey, 2018). While some positive momentum has been achieved in building more diverse faculty and administrative leadership teams, the appointment and retention of Heads of color still lags behind, signaling a need for interventions to guide improvement (NAIS, 2023). Given the well-documented racial disparities across independent schools' organizational leadership and NAES's explicit commitment to principles of diversity, justice, equity, inclusion and dignity, the Association is poised to lead in the identification of strategies to promote successful leadership outcomes for Heads of color and the schools they serve. These initiatives are critical for fostering a more inclusive, representative, and equitable environment within member schools.

Methodology and Research Questions

This exploratory mixed methods investigation focuses on the lived experiences of Heads of color (HoC) in independent schools, in order to better conceptualize the resources that promote their experience of a sense of support, which ultimately contributes to their well-being,

persistence, and retention as leaders within their school communities. Through qualitative interviews and a survey of the focal population, this study seeks to answer three research questions, through the lens of well-established organizational theories related to workplace support, belongingness, well-being and climate.

- *What factors enhance and diminish a sense of support for individuals who are Heads of color in NAES/independent schools?*
- *What factors influence the well-being and capacity to persist as school leaders for Heads of color?*
- *How can boards of trustees create conditions for Heads of color that enhance their well-being, cultivate a sense of care and support, and promote their capacity to persist and thrive as leaders?*

Findings

1. The authenticity of the NAES community and programming, offering of NAES affinity spaces, and visibility of fellow leaders of color throughout NAES enable NAES Heads of color to feel seen, valued, and supported.
2. A collective spiritual backdrop rooted Episcopal values of inclusion, the affirming of individual identities, social justice, and beloved community buoys NAES Heads of color in their leadership.
3. A sense of support for Heads of color is most powerfully enhanced through relationships with other Heads of color, networks and communities of Heads of color, and the effectiveness of the administrative team at their school. Support was amplified when fellow administrators were also people of color.
4. A Head-board chair relationship characterized by rapport, transparency, trust, and consistent communication is a cornerstone support for Heads of color. The sense of support is enhanced when the board chair and/or trustees are also people of color.

5. A sense of support for Heads of color is diminished by pervasive skepticism of credibility and competence, being generally subject to intense scrutiny, and a heightened performance pressure relative to white predecessors, which contributes to a feeling that there is “no room for error”.
6. A sense of support for Heads of color is diminished by being disrespected, regularly operating in spaces in which they are “the first” and “the only” person of color, and being subject to assumptions that they lead with a predominant DEI agenda.
7. A majority of Heads of color in this study perceive that their boards of trustees possess good and sincere intentions with regards to providing support, but sometimes lack the tools, training and strategies to consistently deliver on that promise.
8. Heads of color at predominantly white independent schools carry the weight of “invisible burdens” inherent to their racial identity that contribute to a pervasive depletion of their well-being and persistence as school leaders.
9. When Heads of color do not feel seen as “whole persons” with private lives and needs outside of their Headship; are not afforded emotional support and care by trustees; and do not have authentic opportunities to engage in rest, their well-being and persistence as leaders are depleted.
10. Ongoing engagement with an executive coach, therapist, and/or religious counselor who provides emotional support and facilitates sense-making for Heads of color promotes their well-being and persistence as school leaders.
11. Ongoing practices of “paying it forward” via personal outreach to new Heads of color to provide support; engaging with other independent school leaders of color in text threads; and participating in affinity-based professional development programming provide renewal and promote persistence and well-being for Heads of color.

12. Heads of color at predominantly Black and brown independent schools experience a uniquely rewarding and purposeful experience that intensifies their well-being and persistence.

Recommendations for NAES

1. **Continue perpetuating a culture and climate which is characterized as welcoming and inclusive for all educators of color.**

Practices which will aid in furthering this enterprise include an expansion of affinity-based programming and professional development for educators of color and emerging leaders of color. Specifically, the Association is encouraged to explore establishing an inaugural Emerging Leaders Institute for faculty and mid-level administrators of color at member schools. A program of this nature not only has the capacity to continue to promote a sense of support for these individuals, but to contribute to a stronger network and pipeline of future leaders. It is also recommended that the Association explore offering a monthly virtual spiritual community space for all member school leaders to engage in mindfulness and reflection centered around the Episcopal core values identified in Finding 2.

2. **Formalize a networking directory/database of member school leaders of color in partnership with current NAES Heads of color who have ready access to key contacts.**

Those included in the database should be surveyed in order to be tagged as mentors for emerging leaders or prospective faculty participants in initiatives such as the aforementioned Emerging Leaders Institute. Gathering and maintaining this data will serve multiple purposes: Facilitating local support in regions in which new Heads of color and administrators of color are appointed; Allowing NAES to accurately track data over time; Enhancing NAES's communication efforts for the promotion of affinity programming and professional development for current and future leaders of color; and Cultivating intra-network engagement to promote mentorship and sponsorship.

3. **Lead or partner in the development of a robust and scalable set of key, evidence-based learning resources for trustees, to enhance their competence in establishing the**

conditions which will increase the probability of leaders of color experiencing an authentic sense of support.

These resources could include self-directed learning modules that trustees engage with, complemented by case studies that may be collectively explored to unearth current strengths and blindspots. A recommended partner in this enterprise is ISCA, The Independent School Chairpersons Association. In combination with evidence-based training tools, NAES is advised to publish and promote a set of Trustee and Board Chair Promising Practices that are recommended to improve outcomes for NAES leaders of color (see Recommendations for Trustees).

- 4. Develop a working list of endorsed executive coaches to make available to member schools in order to equip boards with access to high quality resources.**
- 5. Further investigate predominantly Black and brown independent schools led by Heads of color in order to contribute to broader understandings about phenomena of leadership, identity, and community, and to advance strategic support efforts.**

Recommendations for Trustees

CARE & EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

1. Engage in outward manifestations of genuine support for the Head, both publicly and privately
2. Provide ongoing executive coaching and/or therapy that is paid for as part of Head's contract
3. Respect boundaries of Head's need for personal time and rest; demonstrate respect through actions which reflect the value of the Head as a "whole person"

RECRUITMENT & ONBOARDING

4. Provide transparency to people of color who are candidates under serious consideration for Headship regarding school climate and culture with specific attention to sharing

experiences of marginalized stakeholders/subcommunities, school history, and current DEIBJ efforts

5. Organize a multi-staged transition team of trustees who provide structured opportunities for trustees to build interpersonal connections with the new Head of School, offer holistic support to Head's family, and aid in geographic relocation with specific attention to the first 18 months of Headship
6. Provide new Heads with ready access to professional networks of other Heads and funding for professional development opportunities with a specific focus on regional networks and affinity based networks and conferences
7. Ceremonially recognize individuals who are the school's first Head of color

BOARD EDUCATION & STRATEGY

8. Commit to ongoing Board training (regardless of whether current Head is a Head of color) including access to experiences of Heads/leaders of color, and unconscious bias and intercultural competence training, with specific attention to anti-bias hiring and recruitment practices
9. Commit to board chair consistency (prior and post onboarding of a new Head) and increased explicit commitment of board chair's time, care and social capital in years 1-3 of Headship
10. Exercise ongoing, strategic commitment to recruitment of people of color for board

Discussion & Conclusion

NAES and their member schools' boards of trustees desire evidence-based strategies to effectively support the Heads of color who serve in NAES schools. Understanding what contributes to these leaders' capacity to persist and thrive is an area of inquiry which directly aligns with NAES's mission to "create and nurture an extended community of leaders in order to foster partnerships, unity, mutual support, and professional growth" (NAES, 2024). Since effectively supporting school leaders is vital to realizing NAES's objectives, this study has endeavored to deeply explore the factors that both enhance and diminish feelings of support for

Heads of color and to increase understanding regarding the phenomena which influence their capacity to persist and thrive. In order to promote positive outcomes related to the well-being, a sense of support, and motivation to remain in positions of school leadership for Heads of color, evidence-based responses for both the Association and member schools' boards of trustees are provided. While the qualitative data in this study reflects the needs and experiences of NAES member school Heads of color, it is complemented by data from Heads of color at independent schools who are not affiliated with NAES. This serves to deepen understanding of the focal phenomena and increases the capacity for impact beyond NAES, if interventions are applied. The hope is that this knowledge and the affiliated recommendations will not only contribute a better understanding of these individuals' experiences, but also position NAES to better serve its membership, strengthen Episcopal schools, and "foster excellence through association" (NAES, 2024) while simultaneously contributing to improvement across the broader independent school leadership landscape.