HSEC: Best Practices in Head Support & Evaluation

BACKGROUND
In 2016, I was asked to be part of the Head Support and Evaluation Committee (HSEC) for Mandel Jewish Day School (Mandel JDS). The committee had existed off and on over the tenure of the current head but had most recently been inactive. I was happy to be part of the committee but since it was essentially a new committee, we were starting from scratch and I was unclear about what the committee was supposed to do and how it should be run: who was in charge, the head of school or the committee; how often should the committee meet; were we to focus on support or evaluation; what was the format of any particular meeting; etc. I approached Seymour Kopelowitz, the head of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC) for his advice, which helped shape the makeup and direction of our committee.

Then, in the spring of 2017, I was asked to participate as a fellow in OnBoard, a Jewish non-profit board leadership development program. A major component of the program is a Fellow Project that benefits the home organization of the fellow, in my case, the JECC. I met with Seymour to discuss potential projects and he raised the idea of doing an in-depth study of best practices for HSECs because he felt that the need for effective committees existed in the Cleveland community beyond my particular experience with Mandel JDS.

And so, despite minimal personal experience with HSECs, this report presents the findings of my research, including background reading and conversations with over 30 individuals who have been more intimately connected with the details of running an HSEC. What follows is my synthesis of the information I learned through my research.

RESEARCH PROCESS
I began by reading articles about HSECs written by National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), Independent School Management (ISM), and Steven Lorch, the founding head of school at Solomon Schechter in Manhattan. I later looked online for more articles, including BoardSource and Prizmah, and I followed this research with 32 conversations with people who had some connection to head of school evaluation, including:

- 9 heads of school
- 8 current or former board chairs
- 8 HSEC chairs or participants
- 7 other people who have experience in the field of executive evaluation, whether through consultant practices, other non-profit executive experience or as CEO

The group of 19 schools these contacts are affiliated with includes 4 Jewish Day Schools in Cleveland, 3 independent schools in Cleveland, 9 Jewish Day Schools across the country including schools in Atlanta, Arizona, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, New York, and Philadelphia, and 1 independent school in New Jersey, all based on where I had contacts.

My intent with this paper is to summarize the insights I received in speaking to this varied group of individuals. In many cases, there was agreement across the board on how to implement parts of an HSECs job and in other cases there was no consensus. Where possible, I tried to understand the reasoning behind the different viewpoints and I have included the various ideas below. Please note that my interviewing improved as I progressed and had a better understanding of some specific questions I wanted answered. As such, I didn't discuss every issue with every person, so when I speak about consensus or agreement on a particular point, I do not necessarily mean that all 32 people agreed but just that of those who discussed that particular point, there was or was not consensus.

Although the original intent of this project was to provide a paper consisting of best practices for an HSEC, I have determined that while some parts of an HSEC's duties can be whittled down to a single best practice, most of them need to be viewed in the particular context and atmosphere of the specific school - what works for one might not work for another and what works for one school with a particular head or board chair may not work with another head or board chair. My hope is that even where I am unable to provide one specific set of best practices, I am able to offer points to consider when deciding how to move forward with an HSEC for your particular school.

WHY HAVE AN HSEC
Hopefully, if you are reading this, you are already familiar with the value having an HSEC brings to a school. Steven Lorch's article [Head Support & Evaluation Committee: A Win-Win-Win Strategy](#) does an excellent job of laying out the reasons that having an HSEC helps the head, the board and the school. Essentially, an HSEC assists the head in setting priorities for the year while creating a safe space to receive feedback and improve job performance and professional development. An HSEC satisfies the board's responsibility to evaluate its sole employee and forces the board to focus on strategic vision and not operational duties. And an HSEC increases the number of positive outcomes in the school by both modeling collaborative action and decreasing the gap between intent and outcome.

The existence and practice of an HSEC should be seen as a positive for the school and not as a means to put reins on the head. It is meant as a way to discharge the board's duty to evaluate its only employee but more importantly as a way to establish a culture of discussion and collaboration around the mission of the school and the strategy needed to achieve the desired outcome.

The spirit in which an HSEC is initiated and then structured will be most successful when it is done with collaboration, trust and positivity from all parties - the board, chair and head of school. To this end, an HSEC should not be started when there are already negative feelings felt towards the head of school. Several people I interviewed indicated that when this is the case, it is better dealt with by the executive committee of the school.

One last note in this regard is that the heads of school that I spoke with were all appreciative of the evaluation processes set in place by their schools. They wanted the feedback and opportunity to hear where and how they could improve themselves, their leadership and ultimately their schools. Some of the heads felt so strongly about the importance of receiving this type of guidance that they were the ones who had initiated the evaluation process, asking their boards to create HSECs. If done in the right manner, with a stated goal of improving conversation and growth, an HSEC will be viewed by the head of school as a positive benefit to all involved.

SUPPORT OR EVALUATION vs SUPPORT AND EVALUATION
Initially, the idea of support and evaluation together seemed at odds to me and I was surprised to find both of them set as distinct roles of a single HSEC rather than as separate goals of separate committees. Indeed, throughout the course of my conversations, I found that schools tended to tilt more toward one of the two functions rather than integrating them together. Interestingly, the independent schools each separated the jobs of support and evaluation, often having a small committee clearly focused on evaluating the head and then using a separate committee - either a head council or the executive committee - for the role of support. Even in this situation of focusing more on evaluation, the evaluation was done in a positive manner with supportive discussions around the challenging areas where a head needed growth.

Among the day schools I spoke with, it was a nearly even split regarding whether the emphasis of the HSEC was more on evaluation, more on support or somewhere in the middle. In nearly all cases though, the evaluation process worked well and the individuals I spoke with were happy with the process, indicating again that it is the air in which the committee is used that matters most, that the head sees the process as developmental and not as an attack.

Even with the evidence that schools were able to incorporate both support and evaluation together, I had a hard time understanding how the process could be fully open and maximally supportive when the evaluative component was included. It seemed to me that a head might have a difficult time being completely honest about the challenges being faced when the people the head was sharing concerns with were the same people evaluating the head. Would someone open up, allowing themselves to be vulnerable and exposed, knowing that the fate of his or her job could be altered? It seemed that the answer was yes, based on the experiences of those I spoke with, but I did not really understand how that might happen in practice.

An analogy that helped me resolve the issue and see how support and evaluation can be successfully woven together into a single committee is that of teacher and student. I believe (without being an educator, I have no evidence that this is true but I believe it is and perhaps it will resonate with some of you as well) that the best teacher student relationships are those that are both nurturing and challenging. That is, the teacher offers a learning environment where the student not only feels encouraged to excel and to learn, but the student actually wants to achieve, to accomplish and to grow. In this situation, the student knows that the teacher will evaluate the student, will offer a grade and possibly a written summary of the student's abilities

and areas of challenge and yet, despite this knowledge that the teacher will be evaluating the student, the student voluntarily seeks opportunities to ask questions and show lack of knowledge or understanding; the student feels comfortable asking for support and assistance from the same person who will be writing the final grade for the year. In the same way, I believe that support and evaluation for a head of school can co-exist in a single committee.

One final comment regarding having one committee or two for support and evaluation is a practical consideration. One of the people I interviewed made the comment that it is hard to find enough quality people for the most important board committees so it might be hard to have two separate committees, one for support and one for evaluation.

THE COMMITTEE: SIZE, MAKEUP AND SELECTION
Below are some recommendations regarding how to create an HSEC committee.

Size
There was broad consensus that a smaller committee is better because it is more manageable, both in terms of finding meeting dates that work for everyone and in terms of having helpful, supportive conversations. There was general agreement that in addition to the head of school, three committee members is an appropriate size for the committee.

Characteristics
Again, there was broad consensus that the following are helpful characteristics for members of the committee to have. With the exception of the first few characteristics, it is not necessary for every member to have each of these characteristics.

- Confidentiality
- Lack of ego - the ability to offer ideas and not take offense if the idea is not followed
- Neutral personal relationship with the head - neither adversaries nor advocates
- Experience in management or human resources or organizational dynamics
- Thoughtfulness, especially strategically
- Good listener, plain thinker, clear words

Who
Occasionally schools' bylaws state who should be on the committee: Board chair, past chair, etc, but for the most part this is decided on a case by case basis. Some ideas include asking a head of school, perhaps from a nearby independent school, or a former head of school (likely to have more time to commit) to be on the committee, using a past board chair or including members of the executive committee, though for the most part, this committee should be separate from the executive committee, both because of the time consuming nature of each committee and in the interest of allowing the head to have some say in who is on the committee (see section on Selection below).

In general, parents are not used on the committee because they may be unable to separate their role as parent from their role as HSEC member. There are also concerns about having donors on the committee, though major donors often already know the negatives and still care about the organization. Care should be taken that the donor is a supporter of the organization and not just a supporter of the head of school. As with most of these recommendations, using or not using parents or donors or any set role (past chair, executive member, head of school, etc.) should be determined based on the existing relationships and specific individuals and not based on an overarching principle (i.e., no parents or always have a past chair on the committee).

Selection

For the most part, the people interviewed felt that there should be agreement between both the board chair and the head of school regarding who is on the committee. It is necessary for both parties to trust the process and trust the people, so it makes sense that they should both have a say in selecting the committee members. In general, where there was disagreement with this policy, it was from organizations that focus more on evaluation than support and in those cases, it is the board chair who selects the members.

Whether the selection is done by having the board chair and head each nominate one member and then together coming up with a third or whether the board chair selects the HSEC chair and then the HSEC chair, board chair and head all brainstorm ideas, all three members should be agreed upon by both the board chair and the head of school. The main point to keep in mind is that in order to have a positive feeling towards the committee and the process, the board chair and head of school should both respect and have confidence in the committee members.

Board Chair

An area where there was not consensus among the people I interviewed is whether the board chair should or should not be a member of the HSEC. Of those who mentioned whether the board chair was part of the committee, twice as many felt that the chair should be a member as felt that the board chair should not participate on the committee. Of note is that all of the people who felt that the chair should not be part of the committee also felt that the primary function of the committee is support and none of the people who said that the board chair should be on the committee leaned towards support as the primary function of the committee (note that I did not necessarily specifically ask whether they leaned more towards support or evaluation but my assessment is based on our conversations). ISM's recommendation is that the board chair not participate on the committee.

Just as I was initially stuck as to whether an HSEC should really be HSEC (Support AND Evaluation) or just HEC (Evaluation only), I was also stuck on this point of whether or not the board chair should be included as a committee member. On the one hand, the head of school is the board's employee and the board chair is the voice and leader of the board and as such should be responsible for taking part in the evaluation. On the other hand, there may be times when the head of school and board chair do not have a strong, positive relationship and the

head might need guidance for improving that relationship. Having the board chair in the room during such a discussion might be awkward and not conducive to open sharing.

A reason to support the idea of not including the board chair on the HSEC is that the role of evaluating the head of school is being done by the HSEC and does not specifically need to be completed by the board chair. As with other committees, the board chair can delegate board roles to specific people or committees with the idea that the committee represents either the board or the chair. This preserves the board's job of evaluating the head while simultaneously allowing for a safe and positive space for the head of school to share any concerns or struggles. Note that the board chair and head should be meeting regularly outside of this committee to discuss school matters, adding another arena for support. Having an HSEC without the board chair present gives the head an additional outlet or opportunity for support and guidance.

A suggestion I have, though it has not been tested to see how it works in practice, is to have the board chair attend three specific HSEC meetings:

- The creation of goals (though in practice this might take up 1-2 meetings)
- The mid-year assessment
- The end of year evaluation

In this way, the board chair is more directly involved in the evaluation process while still allowing for the head to have a space to discuss any concerns regarding his or her relationship with the board chair during the intervening support sessions (see next section on Yearly Timeline for more details on these distinct meeting times).

YEARLY TIMELINE
When thinking about how to schedule HSEC meetings over the course of a school year, it might be helpful to consider two different types of meetings - support meetings and evaluation meetings - and to view them as separate processes that both stem from the base groundwork of setting goals.

Generally, the summer can be used as a time to set the goals for the coming year. This is discussed in more detail below in the Goal Setting section. Once the goals are set, the evaluation and support processes continue over the course of the school year.

Evaluation Process
Generally, the HSEC meets for the purpose of evaluating the head twice after the initial goals have been set. Many schools perform a mid-year evaluation, with varying degrees of evaluation, meaning that some schools do a complete evaluation including a self-assessment and board survey at this time and others just do a check-in as to how the head is coming along in accomplishing the specific goals. Regardless of what is done at the mid-year point, the schools have a thorough evaluation in May at the end of the school year (discussed in more detail below).

Support Process

The frequency of meetings for offering support to the head can vary depending upon what is needed by the head but a general recommendation is to meet every 4-6 weeks. A newer head of school might meet more frequently than a head who has been in place for several years. Asking "How can we help" should be a common refrain in each support meeting.

Diagram

It might be helpful to view the process in terms of a timeline as follows:

Jul - Aug	Sep - Dec	Jan	Feb - Apr	May or Jun
Set Goals	2-4 Support Meetings	Mid-year assessment	2-3 Support Meetings	Final Evaluation

GOALS

As mentioned above, the HSEC year should begin with setting goals for the head for the upcoming school year. There was general agreement among the people I interviewed regarding the number and type of goals and the only area where there was slight disagreement was in who sets the goals. All agreed that the head's goals should be tied to the board's goals and the school's strategic plan, and many schools suggest that the head have a personal development goal as well.

Who Sets

Generally, most people feel that the goals should come from both the head and the HSEC but for the most part, the schools I spoke with followed the policy of having the head set the goals initially and then through conversation, refining the goals with the help of the HSEC. It can be helpful if evidence is provided for why these should be the goals. Some schools also utilize the executive committee to help set the goals because the executive committee is comprised of individuals who are very involved and knowledgeable about the school.

Number

There should be a manageable number of goals so that the head is not overwhelmed. Generally, this means something like 4-6 goals. In cases where there are fewer goals, some schools then have sub-goals that fall under the overarching goal. Something else to consider is the experience of the head. Someone who is newer to the school might have more granular goals while someone who is more experienced might have broader goals.

Measurable

Everyone agreed that the goals should be measurable so it is clear whether they are being met. Additionally, the goals should be created in consultation with the school's strategic plan and board goals, if they exist. Goals can take different forms as well, such as focusing on strategy

or operations. A discussion of the benchmarks used to evaluate the head's progress on the goals should occur when the goals are set.

EVALUATION

How the evaluation is actually performed varies widely across schools and my opinion is that the culture of the school should dictate the specifics of the evaluation. However, a few suggestions are listed below.

Self Evaluation

Several schools ask the head to perform a self-evaluation as part of the assessment process. This can take the form of a written report on each goal. The goals are then discussed with the committee as a whole, with the self-assessment used as the starting point for conversation on how the goals have been accomplished.

Survey

The people I spoke with were split as to whether to conduct parent, board and faculty surveys. For the most part, parent surveys are not done, in part because evaluating the head could then become a bit of a popularity contest and in part because parents are not great at looking at the bigger picture or seeing beyond what is perceived as personal slights. That being said, if one of the goals of the head is specifically related to parent perception and opinion, then surveying parents would be an appropriate way to measure the head's progress in that area. Additionally, while most schools do not survey parents about the head, some of them do suggest surveying parents about the school itself.

Similar arguments were given as to why many schools do not survey the board for feedback on the head's performance. There is particular concern that boards do not have enough information to accurately assess the head's performance. Some schools embrace surveys for this particular reason - they want to know where there is a lack of accurate information and use the survey results both for evaluating the head and also for assessing where extra board education needs to be done.

In terms of the types of questions to ask on a survey, the schools reported that open ended questions are helpful, as are questions that require written comments, such as:

- What do you like
- What do you want to stop
- What are the head's limitations
- What are the head's significant achievements over the past years
- Are there any external factors that influence performance
- What are areas where the board can provide better support to the head of school
- What should be the organizational goals for the head of school in the coming year

Sample categories for questions can include:

- Performance of annual goals
- Strategies around the vision, mission and values of the school
- Accomplishment of management goals
- Program and project management
- Fiscal management
- Operations management
- Head of school/Board partnership
- Constituent relations and public image

NAIS and BoardSource are good sources of survey questions, though there may be a fee assessed in order to access them. While it is helpful to have a survey instrument that is the same from year to year for tracking purposes, sometimes flexibility is needed with respect to the particular goals for that specific year.

If faculty surveys are performed, they should be conducted by an outside, independent organization so the faculty will feel free to be honest without fearing repercussions if they have negative comments.

Once the results are received, usually the HSEC chair and/or board chair together review the survey results in detail and then together meet with the head to give feedback from the survey, usually not sharing every single comment but focusing instead on the big ideas gleaned from the survey. Sometimes the entire HSEC committee is involved in the process but for the most part, this is done in a smaller group with only the head, HSEC chair and board chair present. If results are shared beyond that immediate group, the details are omitted and only the larger themes and overall trends are conveyed. Also, some schools choose to share a high level report on the survey results with the executive committee.

Evaluation
The evaluation itself can take many forms. The head's self-assessment can be used as a starting point for conversation in addition to questions such as:

- What does success look like to you
- What is your vision and what are 3 things that are going to help you meet that vision
- What is your greatest strength
- List some major highlights and lowlights of the past year
- What would you like your legacy to be
- How aligned are your perceptions of yourself and your role with the perceptions of other groups (faculty, parents, board, students, community)
- Where do you spend your time and where do you think you should be spending your time

These questions can also be asked of the HSEC committee members to fill out in private, along with any words of advice they have for the head. Then the HSEC chair can tabulate the results

and review them with the board chair. Some schools suggest then sharing the results with the executive committee (because they have more touch points with the head) to see if the review resonates with their picture of the head's performance. An ISM suggestion is that together, the HSEC chair and the board chair should give the evaluation results to the head. A key thing to remember is that feedback should not be hidden from the head of school. This puts the head at a disadvantage and the head needs to have a chance to improve.

Reporting to the Board

The HSEC is the instrument by which the board executes its core responsibility of evaluating its sole employee, the head of school, and the HSEC is responsible for reporting back periodically to the board on its charge. For the most part, this is done at three times throughout the year:

- August or September after the goals have been set
- Mid-year for a progress update
- June for a final evaluation report

In August or September, the head can share his or her goals and the thinking behind them. At subsequent meetings, the head can give updates on the goals. Additionally, the board can go into executive session to hear from the HSEC chair regarding the mid-year and final evaluations. These evaluations should be somewhat high level without revealing any confidential information. Some schools also use the executive session as a way to gather information to be used in the evaluation.

A final note is that while a handful of the schools vote to accept the head's goals, most schools simply report the goals to the board as a way of informing them and not asking for approval. ISM also suggests that reporting the goals to the board is for information and not for approval.

Compensation

Almost none of the schools tie compensation only to the evaluation and none of the schools have the HSEC participate in the compensation process. In a few cases, the HSEC chair is either asked to be on the compensation committee or to give feedback to the compensation committee but in general, they are separate processes. ISM recommends that the two conversations not happen concurrently. Rather, the contract and compensation discussions happen after the evaluation process is complete, partly because the evaluation is just one factor in these discussions.

CONCLUSION

Overall, there are two main things to remember when it comes to HSECs:

- Along with fiduciary oversight and setting the strategic vision of the school, evaluating the head of school is one of the most important jobs of the board of trustees.
- The manner in which an HSEC is implemented is key to its success. This should be done in a collaborative, positive atmosphere for the benefit of the head and the benefit of

the school and this means that some of the specifics of execution will vary from school to school or from year to year.

In case you still are not sold on the value of an HSEC, here are a few quotes from the people I spoke with, who were all compelling and passionate and more articulate than I about the importance of evaluating a head of school.

> Fundamentally, the platform of the HSEC is the most important responsibility of the board. The only function the board has is with regards to the head and so therefore HSEC is fundamental along with fiduciary and ambassadorship.

> Start with the assumption that the professional is a competent person and the role of evaluation is to identify ways in which that person can improve his/her practice as a professional.

> Begin with a belief in growth and partnering with the head; this changes the dynamic of the process for the school community from anxiety-provoking to normal ideas of growth for the school.

> HSEC is about investing in the head.

> HSEC is more about the conversation than about the end results.

> Feedback is a positive, not a negative, thing.

> When there is something that is the slightest bit shaky (say enrollment numbers), boards tend to believe that the head is responsible. This is why boards should know the goals so they know what the head is being evaluated on.

> An HSEC systematically promotes a head's professional growth. In addition, it strengthens the board's focus on strategic issues and priorities and deflects board members' attention from operational distractions (Quote taken from Steven Lorch's Win-Win-Win article).

Finally, I would like to thank everyone I spoke with throughout the course of this project. Every person I spoke with contributed in some meaningful way and I was struck by how lucky our organizations are to have such dedicated, thoughtful and passionate individuals associated with them. I was also blown away by and so appreciative of people's willingness to take time out of their busy days to speak to a stranger in another city. It is so heartening to see that people feel so strongly about not only bettering their own niches in the world but also about helping others achieve a similar level of success. This sense of comradeship and collaboration makes me feel incredibly positive about the future of our Jewish day schools across the country.

APPENDIX: LIST OF ARTICLES

Listed below are the articles I read at the start of my research. Steven Lorch's article is especially well written in support of having an HSEC. Please note that many of the articles were photocopied and emailed to me so I am not able to give them a proper bibliography but I hope that the information I am providing is enough to find the articles if interested in further reading.

Head Support & Evaluation Committee: A Win-Win-Win Strategy by Steven Lorch
https://prizmah.org/head-support-evaluation-committee-win-win-win-strategy

ISM Articles
       ISM Research Report: 16 Characteristics of Head Leadership
          Ideas & Perspectives, Vol 29, No 14, p 16-20

       Head Evaluation: 10 Steps to an Approach That Gets Results
          To The Point, Vol 10, No 6, p 21-23

       The Head Support and Evaluation Committee: What Does 'Support' Actually Mean?
          Ideas & Perspectives, Vol 30, No 7, p 32-33

       Governance & Management: Is your school's Head evaluation just a 'form'ality?
          To The Point, Vol 7, No 4, June 2001, p 19-21

       Your Head Support and Evaluation Committee: A Checklist
          Ideas & Perspectives, Vol 33, Nos 1-2

PEJE Articles
       Professional Leadership Sustaining Cycle

AAIE Articles (Association for the Advancement of International Education)
       Nurturing the Head of School by Jim Ambrose

Prizmah Articles
       Support for the Head = Support for the School by Judy Miller

Web articles from BoardSource and NAIS:
       Executive Evaluation and Compensation
       https://boardsource.org/fundamental-topics-of-nonprofit-board-service/executive-evaluation-compensation/

       How to Conduct a Chief Executive Performance Assessment in 10 Steps
       https://boardsource.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/10-Steps-CEO-Performance-Assess.pdf?hsCtaTracking=c6bde970-d784-4aae-9f00-099848bc082d%7C5737602a-5213-4cd5-a8e6-9b5e5ffd5796

The 6 Core Competencies of Nonprofit Chief Executives

https://boardsource.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/6-compentencies-NP-CEO.pdf?hsCtaTracking=a9fd85c0-9358-4aef-ab56-2499129a92f5%7C62803b82-f603-428d-bb5b-fdeec8d0fac0

Evaluating Board, Heads, Administration, and Faculty (see page 19 of the powerpoint)

https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/evaluating-board-heads-administration-and-faculty/