
LEADING TRENDS

Are You Ready for Attrition Season?



[NOTE: This is the first of two *Leading Trends* articles on student attrition. This piece will examine an often vicious cycle between board members and heads of school, while the next will cover ways schools can attack the attrition bugbear.]

Attrition season is upon us! Attrition—especially the loss of students to competitor schools as opposed to moving to another city or country—is rarely zero and always

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troublesome. Eagle-eyed and sometimes malevolent board members tend to seize on the data as evidence in support of their personal campaign against the athletic director or university placement list or head of school.

Heads of school, bolstered by their enrollment management staff, argue that the percentages are within historic norms and mine DASL for benchmarks showing that many peer schools have a similar attrition rate. Neither tact mollifies the malevolent and likely not even the merely anxious board members who worry the exodus of a few could turn into a torrent of defections.

Consider the case of a small school with just 380 students JK-12. Attrition between 8th and 9th grades at this school typically runs around 10%, so with a class of 22 8th graders, one would expect to lose two or three. Attrition this year will be six students, higher than usual and toward the top end of the historical range. Is there any surprise that board members ask challenging

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questions, especially since the loss of three additional students would be enough to swing the budget into a deficit?

This is where the Law of Small Numbers comes into play: In a small school, an otherwise small number of anything takes on outsized significance because of the limited comparative backdrop.

[The large school version of the law is that even meaningful small numbers are easy to ignore when the comparative set seems so vast.] Like a full moon viewed near the horizon versus higher in the sky, the Law of Small Numbers reflects the tendency of context to skew perception and thus interpretation.

Administrators respond by pointing out that school-wide attrition is higher than average but still within the typical range. The head calls attention to an unhappy former parent who has gone fully rogue now at a competitor school and is sending emails to 8th grade parents to encourage them to switch. Management's message to the board is that the attrition is unfortunate but

unavoidable, and the only option is to ride it through, something that is difficult to do in an under-endowed, tuition-driven school already nearly on the financial ropes.

Even when new admissions balance or exceed attrition, board members are more sensitive to leaving families because they often know and are friends with them. This familiarity bias causes board members to over-weight the salience of leavers and ignore the counterbalancing effect of newcomers. Because of this bias, we are not sure "riding it through" is the best or only option, especially since next year there will be another set of extenuating circumstances with which to explain attrition, and at some point board members' patience will wear thin with what starts to sound like excuses.

After watching this troubling cycle play out numerous times, we think board members become more concerned because they perceive administrators as not concerned enough. In other words, board members and heads of school wind each other up. The more explanations heads offer, the less concerned boards perceive them to be; hence, the more concerned—and intrusive—the board becomes. This is a classic vicious cycle, but it need not wind ever tighter.

One way to interrupt the cycle would be for board members to become more adept at recognizing biases like familiarity and the Law of Small Numbers and guard against governing from within those cognitive distortions. That would help them become less reactive and more cautious in response to incoming information.

Another answer is for heads to show boards they are even more concerned about attrition than the typically anxious board member. We do not mean that heads must agree that there is a problem—unless one truly exists—but they must not appear to gloss over or minimize attrition. Showing the board that you take attrition seriously is a massive step toward unwinding the vicious cycle. Remember: Board and administrative anxiety are in a

hydraulic relationship; the more seriously you take attrition the less they will feel the need to do so.

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