

Understanding the “Independence” of Episcopal Schools

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A new trustee is surprised to realize the depth of the school’s relationship to its diocese: “I thought this was an independent school!”

A rector hears the school described an “independent school” and fears that it is rejecting its relationship to the parish and abandoning its Episcopal identity. “This is a parish school!”

An independent school accrediting team is unsure of what to make of the vestry-board relationship. “What kind of school is this?”

When it comes to Episcopal schools, it is easy for language to become muddled and misunderstood. Because of the variety of governance structures within Episcopal schools, the word “independent” can mean different things to different people.

By itself, the term “independent school” should neither advance nor undermine a school’s Episcopal identity. Indeed, it is usually appropriate to describe an Episcopal parish, cathedral, or diocesan school also as an “independent school.”

At the same time, rectors, cathedral deans, and other Episcopal Church leaders can become legitimately worried when the school overuses the word “independent,” concerned that it signals a movement away from the church-school relationship and/ or a diminution of the school’s Episcopal identity. Sadly, too often this is the case.

The strongest Episcopal schools find a third way: they successfully balance and blend a clear and strong Episcopal identity with best practices in independent school education and, in so doing, sustain Episcopal schools that not only survive but thrive.

Episcopal Schools as “Independent Schools”

Regardless of corporate structure, most Episcopal schools operate in the “independent school” world. Independent schools are the primary peer institutions and competitors of Episcopal schools; and membership in the “independent school” community distinguishes Episcopal schools from other types of private, non-public schools such as Catholic parish or diocesan schools, private proprietary schools, Christian academies, and for-profit schools.

By definition, an “independent school” is a financially self-sufficient, non-profit corporation. With minor exceptions, independent schools operate outside of government regulations and funding. Instead, each school determines who it shall serve and how it shall serve them.

Independent schools are known for high quality programs, strong teacher-student relationships, and freedom from government regulation. They are not accountable to public agencies but to regional accrediting organizations.

On balance, Episcopal schools share the following characteristics of independent schools:

- The school defines its own mission, programs, and students served.

- The school has a self-perpetuating governing body responsible for advancing the school's mission, developing policy, insuring the school's long-term financial health, managing the school's assets, and overseeing the school's compliance with legal, regulatory or accreditation requirements.
- The school is financially self-sufficient and relies on a combination of tuition and charitable dollars that must be generated by the school community year after year and managed on the school's behalf.
- The school provides a contracted fee-for-service.
- The school is staffed by professionals who are knowledgeable about best practices in school governance, leadership, operations, teaching, and learning.

For all of these reasons, Episcopal schools are primarily accredited by independent school accrediting agencies; adhere to best practices in independent school governance, leadership, and finance; and belong to independent school associations. Indeed, Episcopal schools have long been leaders in independent education.

At the same time, however, Episcopal schools exist in relationship to the Episcopal Church, and most have a structured, corporate relationship to an Episcopal parish, cathedral, diocese, or other sponsoring organization. Therefore, the word "independent" must be used with specificity and care.

Governance Structures in Episcopal Schools

Here at NAES, we talk about four basic types of Episcopal schools. Understanding these four models can help locate a given school on the Episcopal school- independent school continuum.

Non-separately Incorporated Parish/Cathedral Schools

A non-separately incorporated parish or cathedral school is one corporation with its sponsoring parish. As such, the school exists as a mission of the parish or cathedral and, while governance is shared between the vestry and a school board or school committee, the vestry bears ultimate responsibility for the school.

In these schools, the word "independent" can be particularly problematic because the school is not an independent corporation. However, wise rectors and vestries recognize that the school functions in the independent school educational sector and encourage best practices in independent school governance and operations, within a parish-school context.

Similarly, school leaders overtly name and honor the church-school relationship, including the governing relationship between board and vestry. In a parish/cathedral day school, it is particularly important for the school to articulate simply and clearly what is meant by the terms "independent school" (e.g. an educational sector) and "Episcopal parish/cathedral school." The dean or rector, head, vestry, and school board benefit from developing shared language to describe the school to parishioners, parents, and the wider independent school and Episcopal church communities.

Finally, independent schools of all kinds rise and fall on the strength of the governing board. As a result, independent school accrediting bodies are rightly giving close scrutiny to governance practices as part of the accreditation process. The governing leaders of a non-separately incorporated parish/cathedral school need to demonstrate to the school's accrediting agency how the church-school corporation is knowledgeable of and executing best practices.

Separately Incorporated Parish/Cathedral Schools

While separately incorporated parish or cathedral schools have greater latitude in governance, finance, programs, and policies than their non-separately incorporated colleagues, most are not completely “independent” of the parish or cathedral. Thus, “separately incorporated” does not necessarily mean “independent.” Most continue to operate in church-owned buildings without title to school property. The dean or rector, vestry members and/or parishioners serve on the school’s board of trustees, and certain decisions require vestry approval. Finally, the diocese may require the separate incorporation of parish/cathedral schools even while defining the governing structures of the school via canon law or other diocesan standards.

The separately incorporated parish day school must be as intentional as its non-separately incorporated peers about how it defines and uses terms such as “independent school” “Episcopal school” and “parish school.” Ideally, a separately incorporated parish/cathedral school and its parish/cathedral view one another as mission partners, building on rather than replacing a history of shared purpose, and the school’s separate corporate status is leveraged to insure the school’s the long-term strength, vitality, and financial self-sufficiency as an Episcopal school.

Diocesan Schools

Diocesan schools have a formal relationship to the Episcopal diocese within which they operate. The school may be identified simply as an Episcopal school operating in the diocese with broad “independence” in all other aspects of the school’s governance and operations. In other dioceses, the bishop (or his or her appointee) is an officer or member of the board of trustees and the school may be further accountable in some way to the decisions of a diocesan convention. In still other cases, the school or schools may be owned by the diocese. Each of these formal relationships is outlined in the school’s bylaws and/or in diocesan canons.

Each diocesan school also has an informal relationship with its sponsoring diocese. Some bishops take a great interest in their diocesan schools while other dioceses and schools have a more distant relationship.

If the school and its diocese do not have an active relationship, the school can come to view itself as wholly “independent,” only to be surprised when a new bishop takes an active interest in the school, a new diocesan canon is enacted, or a long ignored component of the school’s bylaws is enforced.

For these reasons, it is equally important for diocesan schools to use the words “independent school,” “Episcopal school,” and “diocesan school” with clarity and intentionality. Leaders of diocesan schools need to understand their school’s canonical and corporate relationship to the diocese and sustain an active relationship with the bishop.

Independent Episcopal Schools

Unlike a separately incorporated parish school or a diocesan school, an independent Episcopal school has no formal corporate relationship with an Episcopal parish, cathedral, diocese, or other Episcopal institution. The board of trustees has sole control over the school’s assets, mission, composition of the board, and all aspects of institutional life. These schools are most often founded by a group of committed Episcopalians or were first a parish or diocesan school that, over time, separated fully from its parent organization as a consequence of school growth, campus relocation, or historical circumstance.

The greatest challenge for independent Episcopal schools is to steward and articulate a distinctive Episcopal identity that distinguishes it from secular independent schools. In the absence of a bishop, rector, or vestry, an independent Episcopal school's religious and spiritual identity can rapidly fade, drift, or erode.

Additionally, even fully independent Episcopal schools may be subject to diocesan requirements. All the more reason for independent Episcopal schools to understand their mission and corporate status as a particular kind of Episcopal school and to cultivate relationships with their diocese, other Episcopal schools, and related organizations of the Episcopal church.

Episcopal schools share a common challenge: to balance and articulate the ways they Episcopal and the ways they are schools.

Wise church leaders encourage Episcopal schools to follow best practices in independent school governance and operations in the context of a clear Episcopal identity. They work with school leaders to insure that the governance of the school is appropriately delegated and executed. Supporting a high-functioning school board or school committee is one of the best ways that Church leaders can help to sustain strong Episcopal schools.

Similarly, wise school leaders embrace the school's Episcopal identity and its relationship to an Episcopal parish, diocese, and the Episcopal Church as essential to the school's long-term health and vitality. School leaders are knowledgeable about the polity and governance of the Episcopal Church. They educate their secular colleagues and accrediting agencies about the school's Episcopal identity and corporate structure in the context of exemplary independent school practice.

To be an Episcopal school is to live in relationship. The variety of relationships between Episcopal schools and the Episcopal Church require schools to navigate and negotiate more than their "independent" needs and wants. Rather, Episcopal schools are called to embrace and model the creative challenge of living in community, extending the good work of the Episcopal Church through vibrant and sustainable educational ministry.

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