

AISNE Market Research Update

I. New Data Analysis

We asked the folks at Maguire Associates to dig deeper into the pool of “Inquirers” and compare families that ended up enrolling a student in an independent school (ENROLLERS) to those that did not (NON-ENROLLERS).

Differences

ENROLLERS report **higher familiarity** with independent schools than do non-enrollers.

ENROLLERS **rate public schools lower in quality** than do non-enrollers on the following dimensions: academic reputation, average standardized test scores, personal attention to students, personal/ethical development, quality of teaching, placement record at the next academic level, school safety and security, small class sizes, student support services, transportation services, and value of education.

ENROLLERS are more likely to see **the investment value** of independent schools and to be motivated by the **ability of independent school teachers to challenge** and help students.

ENROLLERS **expect to pay more** for independent schools and report much higher points at which they would consider an independent school expensive or unaffordable.

NON-ENROLLERS rate **athletic and recreational opportunities** at our schools as **lower in quality** than do enrollers.

NON-ENROLLERS place **more importance on total cost and transportation** services in selecting a school than do enrollers.

NON-ENROLLERS are more likely to see the following as **deterrents** to interest in independent schools: cost, social class, their children’s academic abilities, application process difficulty, a lack of “real world” experience, and a lack of racial diversity.

Similarities

Except for the athletic opportunities difference noted above, these two groups **assign equal/nearly equal quality ratings** to independent schools across a wide variety of school features. This is good news.

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Interestingly, both groups **did NOT differ**:

- in the extent to which they view **how successful** independent schools are in terms of **student outcomes** (i.e., college acceptances and jobs);
- in their attitudes toward the **value** of independent schools **during the elementary years**;
- in how they think their **social networks would react** to their choosing an independent school.

II. Notes from a Focus Group

Several weeks ago Claudia McClure Daggett, Chair of our Board's Marketing Task Force, and I had the opportunity to observe a focus group in Natick organized by NAIS. NAIS is doing a series of focus groups around the country to follow-up on their public opinion poll of two years ago. I had never observed a focus group before and found it fascinating. The group was composed of parents with school-age children with incomes above 200K who had inquired or, in some cases, enrolled students in independent schools. These folks, then, were very much in the "Choir" group as defined by Maguire Associates in their analysis of our data. Here are some things I took away from the experience:

A. General Observations:

- Having a family member or friend who attended an independent school was **a very strong factor** in generating interest.
- Families in **even wealthy school districts** are **concerned about public school budget cuts** and delays in school construction ("Will the new high school be finished in time for my daughter?"). Discussing program cuts one parent said of her child's education, "This is not a dress rehearsal!"

***Suggestion:** Be aware of what's going on in the public school districts around you and be sure you understand why people are dissatisfied.*

- Aside from the usual strengths attributed to independent schools (small classes, personal attention, academic challenge, structure, study skills) this group repeatedly said that independent schools were much better at **counseling and guidance**.
- Echoing one of the questions in our research the facilitator asked parents if they were at all **concerned about how their friends and families would react if they chose a private school** for their child. While our data identified this what-will-the-neighbors-say issue as a relatively low level concern, the

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focus group participants had no trouble articulating possible responses they'd face:

“They'd say we had money to burn...that we were crazy...that we must think we were better than them... that we shouldn't take our kids out of the community... that we should support our public schools.”

One mother explained that she had instructed her daughter **not to tell anyone** that they were considering a move to private school. Another parent suggested that people would be defensive and take such a move as a **critique of their choice** to stay in public school.

Suggestion: Find ways to give parents language they can use when talking about their interest in private schools.

B. Admission Process

All been through at least part of the process at one or more schools and they offered these suggestions for improvements:

- Be as welcoming and friendly as possible. One parent talked about encountering **arrogance** at a school that seemed very impressed with itself.
- Avoid “canned” presentations to groups: “They all sound the same after a while.”
- Pick tour guides with care. One parent reported they had ruled out a school based on the behavior of their tour guide.
- Provide as much exposure as possible to the real school.
- “Talk about what you want to do better; it shows you're thinking about the future.”
- “Differentiate your school from others. Don't pretend you can be everything to everyone.”
- “You know they have a soul. They should just talk about it.”
- “Schools should ask about what you're looking for.”