Is there BLOAT in our schools?
Ratio of Administrators to Students
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In this FastStats the ratio of administrators to students in NAIS and SAIS independent schools is examined. A recent article states that “American schools suffer from constantly growing administrative bloat...In the last 20 years, the number of K-12 administrators has increased 2.3 times faster than the number of students in school.” This FastStats will examine whether there is empirical support for the claim that there is “bloat” in the American school system, at least for NAIS and SAIS independent schools. As always, SAIS schools will be compared to all NAIS schools and you can use the data to reflect on your particular situation.

We first needed to define “bloat.” For this analysis, “bloat” is measured by the ratio of students to administrators (note that for the purposes of this study, administrators means all administrators, including Heads and Presidents). Thus, fewer students per administrator mean more “bloat” and vice-versa. Another key element of this analysis is to determine if there have been changes over time. Thus, statistics were gathered on the median number of administrators and the median enrollment of NAIS and SAIS schools going back 12 years.

In Figure 1 the median number of administrators at NAIS and SAIS schools is presented. The reader can see that in both NAIS and SAIS schools the median number of administrators has increased moderately. For NAIS schools the median was 10 in 2001-2002 and is 11 in 2012-2013 and for SAIS schools it was also 10 in 2001-2002 but increases to 12 by 2012-2013.

In Figure 2 the median enrollment of both NAIS and SAIS schools is displayed and shows a modest decline in the median enrollment figures for NAIS (-3.79%) and SAIS (-3.65%) schools. As an aside the graph also shows quite clearly that the median enrollment in SAIS schools is significantly greater than
for NAIS schools by over 200 students in a given year. In short, the typical SAIS school is much larger than the typical NAIS school.

Figure 2: Median Enrollment in NAIS & SAIS Schools

Figure 3 is generated from the data in Figures 1 & 2 and speaks to the main question of this analysis. When the median enrollment is divided by the median number of administrators the ratio of students per administrator is calculated, representing a proxy of administrator efficiency. Thus, Figure 3 is the ratio of students per administrator in both NAIS and SAIS over the past 12 years. This data clearly shows that the ratio of students per administrator has gone down. For NAIS schools the median was 41.1 students for every administrator in 2001-2002. By 2012-2013 the ratio was 36:1. This represents a 14% decrease. For SAIS schools the median was 65.4 students for every administrator in 2001-2002, and by 2012-2013 the ratio is 52.6. This represents a 24% decrease.

Figure 3: Students per Administrator in NAIS & SAIS Schools

At first glance, and if you are to give credence to the article referenced earlier in this piece, it seems administrative bloat is alive and well in independent schools. Clearly, there's a trend to employ more administrators for fewer students. It should be noted, however, that although SAIS schools had a much greater percentage decrease in efficiency over the past 12 years than NAIS schools, SAIS schools (52:1) were still much more efficient than NAIS schools (36:1). With that said, the essential question is if the
result of this analysis represents a problem, (i.e. bloat) or, does it represent schools strategically responding to the needs of the times and their clientele?

Those who would argue that we've become too bloated would point to statistics such as these and say "the data does not lie." After all, it is clear more administrators are employed for fewer students. On the other side of the argument the increase in the number of administrators in independent schools might be explained and justified by any number of factors. First, perhaps it's the case that we've been historically short-staffed when it comes to administrators in independent schools and the recent trends are just a correction. More likely, however, as the culture and expectations of independent schools continue to evolve, schools are requiring, among many other things, more administrators. For example:

- Due to increased competition, are the expectations of Boards and parents different?
- Has the Head's role evolved?
- Does the fact that more Heads are required to spend so much of their time on external relations and fundraising nowadays that internal tasks, once done more frequently by Heads of Schools, are being done by other administrators (e.g., curriculum oversight, hiring of teachers, etc.)?
- In response to the necessities of our time, are there simply more administrative positions needed (e.g., Diversity, Global Learning, etc.)?

The answer to these questions, based on my experience, is almost certainly yes.

SAIS has recently reviewed Liz Wiseman's book The Multiplier Effect: Tapping the Genius Inside our Schools. Perhaps there is a great opportunity for Heads of School, especially if they are asked by their Boards about administrative “bloat”, to use Wiseman's Multiplier Effect to explain that it's not “bloat” it’s maximizing human potential and thus our school's potential.

Ultimately, this analysis provides only a framework for determining the “right” administrative structure for a given school. A school would be wise to use this data, along with local data, such as constituent surveys, and solid outcome variables (e.g., standardized test results, college placements, etc.) to determine what is optimum.
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