As a Black independent school alumna, a mom of two young children in a K–12 independent school, a trustee at that school, and a founder of a nonprofit organization whose mission focuses on better supporting Black families in our schools, I am more optimistic and excited about the future of independent schools than ever. I am also nervous.

Over the past year, trustees and heads of schools have pondered diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) in our schools, reviewing policies, processes, curriculum, and more. For the first time since desegregation, independent schools are examining race in education not only as a moral obligation in response to public pressure but also as a strategic business necessity. However, it’s time for trustees to fully consider some of the more difficult aspects—the hard truths—related to the racial reckoning in our communities. It’s time for us to look inward and consider our role.

For years, school leaders have known that standardized testing is often biased against non-white test takers. We have known that increased racial diversity in schools yields stronger academic outcomes for all students. We have witnessed microaggressive comments around financial aid, athleticism, academic ability, and more in our school communities. We have known that healthy social and emotional maturation is difficult when students don’t feel like they belong. We have used a curriculum that is not inclusive for far too long. We have known that leadership in our schools is not diverse enough, and most important, we have known that all of this takes a toll on students. All students, one way or another. Yet these issues not only persisted for decades but also became normalized.
There have been modest incremental improvements around DEIJ in schools over the years. More have diversity directors and diversity-related goals. There are affinity spaces for students and adults and DEIJ-specific conferences, and there's now language to describe experiences, such as code-switching and stereotype threat. And indeed, not every school is the same; some schools are further along. Regardless, these advances have not created change across institutions, and issues persisted unchecked for generations. As governing bodies responsible for their community’s health and future, boards need to ask themselves why.

An Unacknowledged Past

Private schools in America have a well-documented history tethered to racism. According to the Southern Education Foundation, “This exodus from public schools began in the 1940s when private school enrollment in the 15 states of the South rose by more than 125,000 students—roughly 43%—in response to U.S. Supreme Court decisions outlawing segregation in graduate and professional schools in the South. While the decisions only concerned institutions of higher education, it signaled to watchful Southern leaders that desegregation might soon spread to their public elementary and secondary schools, compelling them to react in ways to defend their way of life.” White students left public schools to go to private schools where the ruling had no legal bearing. While private schools also provided a way for families to reinforce class, religious beliefs, and more, enrollment grew most notably in response to desegregation.

This is history that isn’t widely discussed; it’s difficult to accept and often downplayed. Many might argue that much of it is only pertinent to schools in the South or older independent schools. But without intentionally considering how systemic and institutional barriers can persist over time, the history and its subsequent impact is applicable for even the youngest independent school. It is important to know the past because it provides critical context about the foundation of our institutions relative to DEIJ. Present-day race-related challenges are hard to address without knowing and acknowledging the deeply rooted historical link. We must consider how that history shaped barriers that are still present today.

According to Michelle A. Purdy, author of Transforming the Elite: Black Students and the Desegregation of Private Schools and associate professor of education in arts and sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, “Knowing the history of their schools, including the strengths, challenges, complexities, and contradictions, helps school leaders to understand how their school culture developed. Deeply grappling with this history can lead school leaders to augment or to change policies, practices, and beliefs to advance a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable school in the 21st century.”

Board Accountability

Many independent schools have retained consultants and are hosting listening sessions, collecting data, and devising stronger strategies and goals to create more equitable school communities where everyone feels a sense of belonging. Many schools have formed a DEIJ task force or related standing committee to provide ongoing oversight and support to these important initiatives at the board level. But many schools are overlooking one major area to review and strengthen against a DEIJ lens—the board itself.

In many respects, as the decision-making body at the highest level of leadership in our schools, boards have broadly fallen short when it comes to supporting inclusive and equitable communities. Boards need to evaluate how and why DEIJ issues persist generation after generation. We need to strengthen our ability to hold ourselves more accountable to safeguard for the future. This is critical to demonstrating committed leadership and helping the school community heal and grow.

Establishing specific board goals, as a body and by committee, and assessing board performance against them is a logical way to increase accountability and to identify ongoing areas of improvement. Additionally, boards need to ask themselves:

- Do we have the right trustees on the board and, more specifically, on the executive committee of the board? Do trustees represent a wide range of perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds?
- Are board terms reasonable? Are terms stifling growth in any way?
- Do we prioritize and discuss DEIJ in each board meeting?
- Do those who are part of under-represented groups on the board fully engage in discussion?
- What are the board’s DEIJ goals? When was the last time the board was evaluated against those goals and how often should we evaluate ourselves?
- How are we assessing the head of school, using what metrics, and how is the board engaged in that process?

**Board Representation**

One of the greatest ways to improve DEIJ in a school is by significantly increasing the number of trustees currently underrepresented by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation. Capitalizing on different lived experiences, values, beliefs, and nuanced understandings is challenging when there is no diversity at the school's senior-most governing level. Without it, perspectives on issues that inform school culture, board makeup, policies, and families' overall experiences will continue to be largely homogenous.

Diversifying historically white boards requires persistence—boards need to resist copping out or rationalizing away need and urgency because of the level of difficulty. It's especially important to address several common challenges when working to increase representation.

**Lack of space.** Bylaws stipulate the size of a board and term limits, and when boards meet the threshold for both there is little room for meaningful, timely additions. Bylaws, however, can be amended by vote. If needed, boards can update the terms; current trustees can consider stepping aside to make space; or if a trustee’s term is ending or needs to end, it presents an opportunity to add a trustee from an under-represented group.

**A vague recruitment and onboarding process.** Governance committees often manage a pipeline and recruitment process without adequately considering the committee’s possible bias and
subjectivity. After all, this same committee kept the board homogenous through the years. Paying attention to the makeup of the governance committee and making sure to incorporate perspectives from underrepresented groups throughout every aspect of the process is as important as the recruitment process itself. The onboarding process is also critical; for many boards, it isn’t much more than an orientation. Onboarding needs to be an ongoing, intentional effort to help trustees feel welcome and educated, especially if they are stepping into a role where there are not many like them.

**Difficulty finding candidates.** Countless boards are struggling to identify possible trustee candidates of color, but too often, they have not fully considered those most immediately in their school communities. It’s essential to understand notions of fit and process responsible for producing homogenous boards, which has also resulted in overlooking suitable candidates. To remedy this, boards need to explore parent affinity groups and the current parent community for candidates. Ask them to extend their networks to help identify possible candidates. If this results in a deluge of interested parents, that is a good problem to navigate.

Until now, there’s never been so much positive momentum toward improving systems and policies once directly tethered to racism in schools and institutions. Raising awareness of how history and subsequent inequities still impact our present-day experience, implementing stronger board accountability, and increasing representation on the board should address root issues that arm against repeating flawed processes that enabled harm for generations. This should increase every opportunity to have an impactful DEIJ-focused lens to governing every aspect of school life.

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**Time to Assess**

As boards consider tools or solutions in the areas of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ), they should choose assessments that are specific to these areas, such as:

- NAIS’s confidential board self-assessment survey highlighting effectiveness and performance and identifying growth areas
- BoardSource board self-assessments that include benchmarked reporting for comparison to other schools

Schools should add specific DEIJ language to these assessments. For example, tweak “How has your head of school managed crisis situations?” to “How has your head of school managed DEIJ-related crisis situations?” Schools can also use DEIJ assessments designed for corporate boards.

Episode 17 of NAIS’s *Trustee Table* podcast, “**Actionable Assessment—Improving Board Performance Through Evaluation and Accountability**,” offers in-depth insights about assessment. In the episode, Anne Stavney, head of The Blake School (MN), describes her board’s evaluation process, how she supports a culture of assessment and accountability in the boardroom, and how
trustees can use data to improve board performance.

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