



Baker. The Progressive School

From the Search Consultants

Doug Cummings, Judith Glickman, and I are pleased to be assisting Baker in its search for a new Head of School for July 1, 2017. Doug and I visited campus for two days in April, and we found Baker to be a marvelous school with a staff of experts in teaching and learning, bright and engaged students, and parents who want the very best education for their children. We conducted extensive interviews in order to get a genuine feel for the culture of Baker. Another way to glean these less tangible and more subjective feelings toward the school is through the online survey that was completed by 190 parents, faculty, staff, and board members. A second survey was given to 166 students in grades four through eight, and their views of Baker are particularly helpful as we search for the “best fit” candidates to be the school’s next leader.

In its long and distinguished history, Baker has never deviated from its progressive roots and philosophy. Constituents understand and appreciate this approach. A summary of comments describes this commitment:

- Baker is a progressive school because of its approach to learning. Students learn by actively doing, and teachers have the autonomy to adapt what and how they teach to the needs and interests of their students. This leads to engaged students and engaged teachers. This approach also allows for flexible integration of the curriculum that focuses on collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking, and development of social skills.
- Baker is progressive because it limits standardized tests and adapts to the students rather than requiring the students to adapt to the school. Learning is fun and allows kids to be kids. Finally, Baker’s child-led approach allows the school to teach the whole child and focus on their social-emotional health.

- Students share this appreciation for progressive education. Students feel that Baker is a progressive school because it offers a different approach to teaching and learning, and everyone progresses at her/his own pace. The teaching is interactive with learning projects that engage the students. The teachers are supportive of students and offer explanations rather than simply telling students what to do. They help everyone and accommodate every learning style with personalized instruction. In addition, Baker is supportive of students. The school asks for student input and offers students the freedom to express themselves.
- There was also general agreement expressed in the surveys when it came to identifying the top strengths of the school. The greatest strengths of Baker are its teachers, administrators, and staff; child-centered nature; and its community. Respondents love that teachers are creative and tailor education to students. The small class sizes and two teachers per classroom enable the school to provide a supportive environment to students in which they are always considered. The progressive education model develops collaboration as well as independent, critical, and creative thinking skills. The immersion in arts and physical education, and the appropriate integration of technology are significant strengths.
- The child-centered nature of Baker allows the education to be tailored to the students. This tailoring makes learning creative and interesting. The needs of students are always considered. Baker is a supportive and safe environment. The community is diverse, inclusive, and open-minded. The parents are involved in the school.
- Students feel that Baker is a fun place to be because of all its activities and specials. They like the pool, Art classes, library, Drama, athletics, almost daily P.E., and the reenactments they do in class. Students feel that Baker offers a supportive, inclusive, welcoming, close-knit community that helps them grow and learn comfortably. They like the bond they can form with teachers and that teachers explain things until students understand them. Students like the teamwork that Baker fosters and that their voices are heard. They also like how Mr. Schwartz interacts with them.

All schools face challenges, and in searching for the next Head of School, it is helpful to gather opinions from constituents regarding the challenges and opportunities that will be addressed in the next three to five years.

According to the adult respondents, the most significant challenges facing Baker pertain to enrollment and financial stability, mission “marketing,” communications, strengthening the middle school, and maintaining the physical space (and ensuring security measures). There needs to be greater consistency in the implementation of progressive education across the grade levels. Baker should recruit top faculty and support/retain its current faculty with competitive salary and benefits.

Developing and focusing on fundraising at Baker can create a sustainable endowment and keep tuition at an affordable rate. Baker needs to maintain its vision and remain true to its mission. A sound approach to strategic planning is needed and should be clearly communicated to constituents. The new Head of School needs to have a high level of engagement with the community in order to tell the Baker story and distinguish the school from its competitors.

As might be expected, student concerns were more specific and immediate, but nevertheless quite thoughtful and cogent. The most significant challenge facing the school from the student perspective is that they are losing their voice. Students do not feel that their opinions are being heard or weighed in the decision-making process. Another challenge is the physical plant of the school. The field conditions are not good from the students’ perspective nor are the locker rooms and bathrooms.

Other challenges are the middle school and homework load in the upper grades, homework that was too easy in some subjects, and discipline practices. The lack of diversity, small school size, getting everyone to agree, and the unevenness of teacher quality are challenges as well. Money (to fix things and the cost of tuition) is the final challenge mentioned by students.

When asked to enumerate the skills, experience and personal traits that they would like to see in the next Head of School, there was

considerable agreement among the adults and students. This was also an opportunity to express great appreciation for the style and substance of Dan Schwartz's leadership.

The next Head of School should be charismatic, decisive (in a timely manner), a visionary, approachable, engaged, visible, personable, compassionate, transparent, honest, and have a sense of humor. The next Head should have experience in and be committed to progressive education. S/He should value diversity, teamwork, collaboration, and be proactive. This person should have strong communication skills including listening, have fundraising experience, and excel at hiring and supporting faculty and staff. S/He should love curious children and be a passionate educator.

Students want the new Head of School to be kind, friendly, dedicated, hardworking, understanding, open-minded, respectful, positive, helpful, funny, energetic, and fun. The new Head of School needs to be excited to work at Baker, and interact with and build good relationships with students. They want a Head of School that builds an understanding of the school by listening to everyone including students. This person should be a good decision-maker that gets things done and do what they say they will do. Students would also like this person to have experience as a teacher.

In all of our dealings with Baker so far, we have been impressed with a remarkable level of consistency among all constituents regarding the strengths and challenges of the school and a sincere commitment to move Baker to its next level of excellence. We are proud to be spreading the word about this unique progressive school as we talk with potential candidates for the Headship.

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