Panelists

- Laura Nagle, Middle/Upper School French Teacher, Chestnut Hill Academy, SAS ‘00, ‘01
- Penny Colgan-Davis, Principal, Frankford Friends School, GSE ‘86
- Lawrence Smith, Associate Dean of Faculty, Phillips Exeter Academy
- A. Grant Calder, History Chair and Director, Friends Central School, SAS ‘80, ‘89
- Samuel Willis, English Teacher and Program Coordinator, The Episcopal Academy, GSE ‘04

Q: Please briefly provide us with some information on your background.

Laura: I received my MA in Romance Languages at Penn and taught in its French program. I then taught at a co-ed day school in Long Island for 3 years before coming to Chestnut Hill Academy, an all-boys school, where I’m in my fifth year of teaching upper school French and Spanish.

Penny: I started out in the Philadelphia Public School system and taught there for 6 years. After that, I taught for 12 years at a parent cooperative school, spent 8 years at Friends Select School (5 as a teacher and 3 as Lower School director), was the principal at Miquon School for 9 years and the principal of Russell Byers Charter School for 3 years. I am now in my fifth year as the Principal of Frankford Friends School.

Lawrence: I grew up at a small independent school in Connecticut where my parents taught and was eventually recruited to teach there by the head of school; I taught there for 10 years and have been at Exeter, a boarding school located in New Hampshire, for 20 years. Exeter has about 1000 students and is committed to small seminar classes of roughly 12 students each. Exeter has students from 46 states and 27 countries.

Grant: I started out teaching at Middlesex and Choate, both boarding schools, and moved to Germantown Friends School and eventually Friends Central (a pre K through 12th grade school) where I have had teaching and administrative responsibilities. The opportunity to take on a variety of roles has made my work fulfilling.

Samuel: I received my MSEd from Penn and taught in the Philadelphia School District for 2 years before moving to Episcopal Academy, pre-K through 12th grade school which has approximately 1200 students. I’m in my fourth year of teaching upper school English and also coach the lacrosse team.
Q: Describe the culture of your school and how it influences your hiring practices.

Laura: While Chestnut Hill Academy may have a traditional look, it is quite modern in term of its curricula. People tend to work there until retirement. We seek diverse candidates.

Penny: Frankford Friends, a pre-K through 8th grade school, is one of the smallest and least expensive Quaker schools in the area. The school is purposeful in extending a Friends education to those who typically could not afford it. The student body is quite diverse (50% white students and 50% students of color). The teachers there were attracted by the diversity and the chance to teaching smaller classes than would be possible in urban public schools. In Quaker tradition, hiring is done by committee.

Lawrence: Exeter also has a diverse student body with 50% being students of color. Because of generous donations from alumni, Exeter is need blind in admissions and offers financial aid, including free tuition to families with an income under $75,000. Exeter has a tenure system available for teachers with at least 8 years of experience. It also hires 8-12 interns a year for one-year internships to assist and observe in the fall, and teach in winter and spring. There is also a Phillips Fellows program that attracts those who may not have normally considered teaching at a boarding school.

Grant: For upper school hiring, there tends to be more interest in those with degrees in the content area. In lower/middle school hiring, education degrees may seem a bit more relevant. For guidance counseling, counselors tend to come from either college admissions or teaching backgrounds.

Samuel: Episcopal Academy, founded in 1785, values its traditions and emphasizes the importance of mind, body and spirit. Candidates seeking to work there should become familiar with the “10 stripes” which summarizes Episcopal’s core qualities for learning. Teachers must also be passionate about their area of expertise, student development and teaching. There must also be interest in advising student groups and coaching students individually.

Q: Describe the level of commitment that independent schools seek from prospective candidates. What are the day to day obligations?

Laura: Teachers carry a load of four courses, advise individual students and serve as an advisor to a student club or sports team.

Penny: In addition to teaching and shared recess duties, teachers typically serve on at least one whole-school committee (Personnel, Quakerism, Green, Facilities).

Lawrence: A mix of teaching, advising and coaching is typical, according to one’s niche.

Grant: Flexibility is key. Working at an independent school is not for those who want everything cut and dry. In fact, a realistic job description would say “I work at Friends Central…” It is also important to address the reality of relatively lower salaries in independent schools.
**Samuel:** Commitment to the school community beyond the classroom is critical, as is the ability to go beyond teaching to meet testing standards. In addition to coaching, I run an afterschool program with Project HOME.

**Q:** Can you speak about the tangible and intangible benefits of working at an independent school?

**Laura:** Chestnut Hill Academy has a professional development fund, which allows for travel. I took a trip to Spain to study. There is also a tuition benefit for the children of faculty.

**Penny:** Being at a small school like Frankford Friends can allow for an entrepreneurial experience where you can become a go-to person in a given area. For example, a couple of staff members who were fascinated with technology have been able to run with that interest.

**Lawrence:** I agree that there are great opportunities at small schools. I took part in and directed plays.

**Grant:** An entrepreneurial spirit is also useful at a bigger school like Friends Central, where there is freedom to develop curriculum and innovate in other areas as well. Of course, there is balance with innovation and making sure students do learn what they need to at a given grade level. Though many work in the summer for summer programs, the load is still somewhat lighter in the summer.

**Samuel:** There is a commitment to teacher development via conferences and opportunities for study all over the world. For example, there was a faculty grant available in Wales to study CS Lewis.

**Q:** Would you speak about parental involvement at independent schools?

**Laura:** Since advisors stay with the same students throughout their time at Chestnut Hill Academy, they get to know their parents quite well. I have been encouraged to refer difficult parents, which are relatively rare, to administrators.

**Penny:** At the elementary school level, parents tend to be very involved; they help with fundraising, volunteer in the library and help prepare meals at times. By middle school, involvement lessens somewhat, resulting in more outreach to parents.

**Lawrence:** Since Exeter is a boarding school, there is less interaction with parents, who tend to respect the teachers’ ability in the classroom. Parents can be more challenging as it relates to athletics.

**Grant:** Because of tuition costs, parents have high expectations but only a handful would be considered problematic. Day school can be more challenging than boarding school since parents have more access. Interaction with parents can get intense in college counseling. An effective administrator is key to address issues so that teachers are freer to focus on teaching.
Samuel: Parents tend to be appreciative and respectful of the school’s effort and are interested in getting involved. One example of a project which engaged parents was an “Evening of English” where parents would read a book and discuss it as a group.

Q: What advice can you offer on the job search? What are good ways to assess the environment of a particular school before deciding whether it is somewhere you would be comfortable working?

Laura: Most administrative hires take place in the fall, with teachers typically hired in the spring. Realize that interviewing can be exhausting; it can cover 1-3 days and everyone is eager to meet you. A good rapport with the head of school and division head is key. Make sure you have time set aside to talk to teachers.

Penny: A degree from Penn should stand out; leverage exposure to recent developments such as project based learning, inquiry focus, and use of technology. Consider exploring the National Association of Independent Schools, which hosts an annual conference. For interviews, bring some highlights from your teaching, perhaps a picture of your classroom, samples of student work, etc… Try to talk to those in their 2nd year as they have had time to settle in a bit. A head of school or division head can make or break a school and sets the tone. Make sure that you get the sense that you could work for a given head of school.

Lawrence: Exeter uses placement agencies and does its own outreach. The aim is to hire in the winter but hiring can spill over into the spring. When you visit, try to talk to a peer or someone close to your experience level.

Grant: The hiring process tends to start in January/February. Try placement agencies (e.g. Carney Sandoe) and apply directly. Figure out what different kinds of things you can do in the school and set up your resume and cover letter accordingly. Most independent schools prefer those who can do a variety of things.

Samuel: Research the school and sit in on classes to get a sense of whether it is a good fit. Know its “points of pride”. At Episcopal Academy, you are asked to teach a class and are evaluated by teachers.

Q & A From Audience

Q. Are Catholic schools totally different from the schools represented on the panel?

Parish schools are different; private Catholic schools are more similar to the schools on the panel.

Q. Did anyone apply without a Master’s degree?

Grant: We are happy to hire non-Master’s degree candidates.
Penny: It made more sense for me to teach before pursuing a Master’s degree.

Laura: A number of independent schools will pay for graduate school.

Q: Given the level of commitment and involvement typical for independent schools, do you have any thoughts on maintaining your personal lives?

Laura: I’ve learned to be more organized so that I’m able to enjoy more free time.

Penny: You need to know your season of life and how to set boundaries accordingly. For instance, things are different when you have small children that when you don’t

Lawrence: At Exeter’s faculty orientation, it is emphasized that you must carve out time for yourself and be intentional about it.

Grant: It’s important to understand the seasonal nature of this work. For instance, September through December is the peak of the college counseling season, so counselors tend to work on weekends during that time. However, the weekend work is focused on paperwork and is therefore quieter. In general, the summer is much more relaxed. I’m also able to teach classes that I really enjoy.

Samuel: It seems that though I work more hours into working at a private school, there is less stress involved.