

Independent schools are expensive. Are they worth it?

BY DOUGLAS J. LYONS, ED.D.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS



When my twins graduated from college 13 years ago, I thought my tuition-paying days were over. Four grandchildren later, I am writing checks to schools again — without hesitation. My 47-year career in education, leading both public and independent schools, has convinced me that my educational “return on investment” will have far more power if spent in the early years. It is rare that a student discovers a love of learning *after* she has been admitted to Yale.

Independent schools are a subset of all private schools. The 93 members of the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools meet or exceed government health and safety regulations and pass a rigorous accreditation process while remaining independent of control by any government, church or for-profit investor group.

Independent schools are mission-driven, founded and sustained by people who believe in the values and standards of the community and who respect (actually, *revere*) the professionals who design and deliver the instructional program. This model has distinct, long-lasting advantages for students over the increasingly standardized, compliance-driven model that characterizes public education in the No Child Left Behind / Common Core era.

In answer to the question “What constitutes a quality education?” independent school leaders defer to educators. In public education, that question is answered by legislators.

The differences between public schools and independent schools have expanded dramatically in the time span since the arrival of the 21st century. The most defining change is found in how each model defines the concept of “smart.”

For most of American history, parents, educators and employers agreed on a definition of “smart.” Smart people knew stuff. They knew more stuff than less-smart people. In school, the smartest kid in the class had more correct answers than any of the other kids. The ultimate role model of “smart” was found in the high school valedictorian — the one student who had more information committed to memory than any of his/her classmates.

Scantron technology developed in the 1950s enabled schools to cheaply and efficiently measure this definition of smart. High scores on standardized tests (short-form, multiple-choice, paper-and-pencil assessments) defined success and became gatekeepers to opportunity.

The stunning contributions of school dropouts Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Larry Ellison, Oprah Winfrey, Mark Zuckerberg and others might have given our nation reason to adjust its definition of smart — but these iconoclasts were viewed as outliers. A better description would be pioneers.

These pioneers displayed the skills of *New Smart*. While *Old Smart* reflects an accumulation of remembered knowledge, *New Smart* describes habits of the mind. While *Old Smart* is a quantity concept, *New Smart* is a mindset.

In an interview for the Wharton (UPenn) radio station, Professor Edward Hess explains: “When knowledge has a short shelf life and smart machines can remember and process more than us, what is *smart* going to mean? Instead of getting your ego wrapped up in how much you know, *New Smart* says “Define yourself by the quality of your thinking, listening, relating and collaborating with others.”

Technology has exponentially magnified the opportunities available to current-day, school-age creative thinkers. They are the *i-generation*

and they are accustomed to learning on their own and learning (even cool, sophisticated things) from peers. Natural collaborators, a large and growing percentage of this generation, consider a 20th-century, “correct answers” education to be deeply unsatisfying and unmotivating.

Employers are expanding their traditional recruitment strategies in order to attract more high achievers in *New Smart*. In a *Wall Street Journal* article titled “The Path From Harvard and Yale to Goldman Sachs Just Changed” (June 23, 2016) the author reports that the famous Wall Street bank has dropped interviews at elite schools in a bid to cast a wider net. That wider net is designed to identify students who demonstrate core values of the firm: “grit,” “judgment” and “problem-solving” — all components of *New Smart*.

Independent schools teach content and measure results. Many use standardized tests. *Old Smart* remains a valued component of a child’s education. But *New Smart* is broadly and widely cultivated on independent school campuses. It inspires interest, passion and meaning in the school experience — for *both* teachers and students. *New Smart* may be the single most compelling differentiator between independent and public schools in Connecticut.

I currently pay tuition for grandchildren who range in age from 3-9. It is possible that my invested funds for their education will not cover college tuition. That is a necessary risk. The skills of *New Smart* are learned in childhood and adolescence. Even our most esteemed universities will be unable to fully repair the loss of curiosity, perseverance and self-confidence that is a common consequence of a 20th-century education in an era that offers and requires much more.