

The Function of Boards in Private Schools

Parameters and Best Practices

In Current School Board Literature

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Schools are frequently lightning rods for value laden and passionate conflict. This is because the socializing of children and the installation of values is a primary product of education. Schools (both public and non-public) are thus frequently highly political communities which are subject to conflict and questions of control. Public schools are ostensibly designed to deal with such conflict and issues of control through highly bureaucratized and ultimately democratic means. Usually, elected school Boards and/or elected officials hold ultimate authority and accountability. They hold the schools in trust through specific legal and democratic process in which the general population can expel them from power. For official church sponsored schools, there is also often an ultimate authority: a pastor, a bishop, or a church council outside of the school itself, which while not always democratically elected, still maintains authority through a clear and established means. For many private and independent schools issues of who ultimately controls the school are not so clear. As self-contained entities, they are often self-referential. They must form their own Boards, select their own governance structures, and make sense of their own experience outside of the control of a larger religious or civic entity. This is no small task, especially for small “start-up” schools which may be starting without a lot of experience or expert knowledge in the

arena of educational organization, governance, and politics. Understanding the role and nature of a Board and its relationship to parents, the school Head, and its own internal operation is critical to enhancing independent school stability and viability.

This brief study will be a review of current literature in the field of private school Board management. It will examine the structure and functioning of private school Boards and review “best practices” helpful to developing and maintaining a healthy and functioning Board. The ultimate usefulness to me to the to of this paper will be its ability to further my understanding school Boards and mechanisms of control so as to help me unpack the experience of several small independent Catholic schools as part of my proposed dissertation.

What Do Private School School Boards Typically Do?

For most private schools, the school Board exists primarily to formulate policy and give direction to the school (i.e., plan). The Board is charged with furthering the school’s mission and ensuring the school’s success. For most private schools the Board is involved in long range issues (rather than day to day operations) and in “big picture” planning and budgeting or budget approval. Independent School Management (ISM) an organization which seeks to provide consulting and resources to independent schools, summarizes it thus: “The Board’s core activity is planning, and the Board’s primary constituency is not today's students but the students of the future” (ISM, *The Board as a Strategic Entity*, 2002, p.4). The National Association Of Independent Schools (NAIS) another resource provider for independent schools in its 1998 *Trustee Handbook: A Guide To Effective Governance For Independent School Boards* by DeKuyper echoes this fundamental principle and emphasizes that the Board functions

as the long term “mission keeper” of the school Dekuyper, p. 18). The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) provides similar advice for Catholic school boards in *is Building Better Boards A Handbook For Board Members In Catholic Education* by Sheehan (1990) and again in its ***Benchmarks Of Excellence Effective Boards Of Catholic Education*** by Convey (1997). All agree that Boards are critical to a healthy private school; all agree that Boards have a critical role in long-term school operations.

All of these groups also agree that the minimal functions of most private school Boards include:

1. Developing a strategic plan
2. Policy development and approval
3. Hiring the principal
4. Approving an annual budget
5. Setting salaries
6. Setting tuition
7. Overseeing financial accountability
8. Ensuring that in broad terms the school is fulfilling its mission

Each of these agencies also stress that the Board should NOT be involved in the day-to-day operations of the school. Such daily practical matters should be handled directly by the school Head (frequently called the principal, Headmaster, Headmistress, school director, dean, etc. For the purposes of this study we will use the term “Head” to refer to the person leading the day to day operations of the school.) NAIS’s DeKuyper emphasizes that individual Board members should never be involved in specific management, personnel, or curricular issues (p.18). The primary responsibility of the Head is to implement Board approved policies. The Head also oversees the implementation of the curriculum and classroom management. As well the Head is

responsible for staff evaluation and hiring and firing within the financial constraints determined by the Board. There will be more on the relationship later. The critical distinction here is that the Board controls the big picture and gives direction to the Head, who implements policy with considerable discretion.

What or Who determines the Formal Power Structure?

When governance problems strike independent schools questions quickly arise about who has what power to decide what issues. It is important that such critical questions be answered proactively before any crises occur. The power structures should be laid out clearly and concisely in the school's constitution and bylaws. This is particularly important as schools tend to be places of high conflict. If a major function of the school is to socialize children into a particular set of values, there is a strong possibility that conflict will result not only about which values, and whose values, are being taught, but even if these are agreed-upon, the means for instilling these values can also lead to conflict. As the conflicts occur, as they will certainly will, the question of who has what power will arise. It is best to set of the rules relating to conflict resolution and power distribution before the actual conflicts arise. These bylaws should be in the possession of each Board member and be available to the parents and staff as well. These bylaws should be reviewed by the Board at least every three years. Any necessary changes to these bylaws should be carefully considered, have strong consensus for support, and go through two separate readings at two separate Board meetings. These bylaws, which are a legal and foundational element of the school, should be carefully considered and consistently followed and implemented.

There is no one size fits all set of bylaws which will work for all private schools. Each school must develop its own set of operating guidelines which meet the particular needs and expectations of the community it seeks to serve. The Board should ensure that its bylaws are consistent with applicable state law especially regarding nonprofit corporate law. However, whatever bylaws it chooses to adopt, the Board should ensure that they are clear, cogent, and reflective of the actual administrative practices of the school. All bylaws should include the school's mission statement and philosophy. The document should also include the legal underpinnings of the nonprofit corporation according to applicable state law. However, the bylaws should be more than a simple legal explanation of how the school operates. They should also include the goals and responsibility of the Board as it relates to leading the school into the future.

A critical element regarding such responsibility and leadership is a clear delineation of powers. The document should answer the basic question of "Who runs the school?" i.e., At the end of the day who makes the final decision on particular issues and how? Most private school Boards stipulate that the Board has final jurisdiction over the institution. The Board typically corporately owns the school's assets. The Board is responsible for approving the annual budget, for developing a long-term strategic plan, and for the evaluation and the hiring and firing the Head of the school. The school Head handles the day-to-day operations of the school, typically without any Board intervention or input. (There will be more on the Board-Head relationship later.)

How is a Board Comprised?

Another question the bylaws should address is that if the Board ultimately controls the school, who sits on the Board? Additionally, who decides how many sit on the Board, for how long, and finally who they actually are. The bylaws should therefore address the number and election of Board members and their tenure. Since the Board has the power to write and re-write the bylaws it can literally shape itself. The power of a founding Board is therefore huge, and founding Board members should spend a significant amount of time thinking in depth about how they will organize the Board and what type of Board they will have. All Boards should require that before any new Board member begins to serve, he or she must possess the willingness and capacity to further the school's mission as stated in its current mission statement, philosophy, and strategic plan.

How Many Should Serve on the Board?

ISM's *The Board as A Strategic Entity* and the National Catholic Education Association's *Building Better Boards* by Sheehan (1990) recommend setting a range of Board members rather than a hard and fast number to provide for flexibility. Practical experience seems to suggest that seven to twenty Board members is common. The number should not be so small that a diversity of experience and opinion is hindered, nor so large that input from individual Board members becomes difficult to manage.

The question of who determines the election of Board members is critical. Many private schools seek to ensure continuity of mission by self-selecting replacements. It is typically the Board members themselves to recommend and vote upon their own replacements by a simple majority vote, rather than allowing themselves to be replaced

by general democratic elections of the population it serves. This is in an attempt to ensure that the institution's mission remains focused and stable in the face of any temporary pressure from constituents. Its goal is not to adapt the school as the current parents or former alumni may prefer, but rather to ensure the continuity of the school's founding mission. Many such self-selecting Boards designate how many parent representatives can sit on the Board.

Should Parents Serve on the Board?

Typically, some limitation is put on the total number of parents serving in an attempt to buffer the school from too much parent interaction. ISM's *Board Building* manual (2002) recommends that parents comprise about 60 percent to 70 percent of the Board. There are several reasons to consider parental restrictions, one is the confidential nature of some of the items which typically come before a board (severe discipline problems, salaries, severe staffing problems, etc.) Another concern is that because the Board sets tuition, some parents may be reluctant to raise it as aggressively as needed since they are essentially raising their own tuition. A further concern is that parents may be more subject to parental peer pressure than a non-parent Board member. While in a minority, there are other private schools that insist that only parents with kids actively attending the school can serve as Board members. Schools with such an arrangement typically hold open democratic elections among the constituent parents to fill vacant Board seats.

Another way of involving parents in decision making apart from partial representation on the Board or comprising the Board only of current parents, is the idea of a representative Board which occasionally consults all the parents via general

meetings of the community. In some Christian schools where parents set up the institution, the Board commonly functions as a governing body and is elected from the membership of the school society. The Board appoints committees, frequently made up of parents, who carry out specific tasks for the Board. The Board basically functions as a representative body making key decisions, but a couple of times a year a general assembly of all the parents is held to allow a general vote on specific issues at hand. Some schools with this form of governance hold these general society meetings in the fall and spring of each year. Items on these general meeting agendas usually includes the election of new Board members to replace those Board members who have completed their terms as well as approval of the annual budget as prepared and presented by the Board. Boards also use these meetings to gather parental input and direction which they then use in their efforts to guide the school.

Regardless of how a school finally deals with the question of parent representation on the Board, it cannot and should not be ignored. In an unpublished master's thesis, *Parental Involvement in Decision-Making and Independent Schools*, Voogd (1996) argues that parents should be actively involved in all aspects of independent schools, including management. Relying on the work of Brown (1990) Voogd emphasizes that increased involvement can mean increased buy-in and commitment to the school. When people are allowed to make decisions and are held accountable for those decisions, they tend to be much more analytical and responsible in making those decisions and will strive to make those decisions work. Voogd comments, "When teachers, students, parents and principals feel they own their schools, benefit from their wise decisions, and suffer from their unwise decisions, there

is great potential to build a good school” (p. 10). Voogd also found that parental input benefits schools by providing broad perspective, creating a responsive and supple organization, and building human relationships. Parental involvement allows a deep sense of ownership to be experienced by the parents which aids in the growth, success, and creation of a positive culture within the institution. Parents who feel as if they are owners, take a greater interest in the school, have more at stake in the education of their children, and hence are more inclined to get involved with the school and supported with their financial and sweat equity. Voogd also relays on a study by Wilson and Coran (19xx) which found that collaborative links with the community strengthen the technical aspects of the school, make the school more accessible and attractive to its base, builds political support, and finally that participation in school activities by adults other than school staff communicate an important message to the students (p. 241).

However, parental involvement can also be problematic. Voogd asked principals what problems they encountered with parental involvement in decision-making. The principals were concerned about the lack of information, background, and experience among parents who were voting on complex issues. They also reported concern about the time needed for the process of involving parents in decision making. Board chairpersons responding to this question identified time commitments required, different perspectives, and a breakdown in governance structures, as detrimental elements involved in parental decision-making.

ISM in its *The Board as a Strategic Entity* publication recommends that Board members who are parents need to be given careful instruction in differentiating their roles as parent and Board member. There can be a temptation for a parent Board

member to be seen or to seem to themselves to have some special authority in the school in daily interactions with teachers and other parents. This should be avoided. It should be clearly understood by all, that parents who are Board members only have authority when sitting in a meeting as a formal Board member. There should be no special treatment for parent Board members in the school and communications with the principal are assumed to be as parent to principal rather than Board member to principal except when the Board is sitting. NAIS's DeKuyper recommends remaining alert for parent-Board members who continually base their governance decisions on their personal experiences with their own children. Reminding all Board members, and especially parents, to maintain confidentiality is also important as other parents may seek information from them which the school does not intend to communicate to the parents as a whole.

How Long Should a Board Member Serve?

The tenure of Board members is another area of some ambiguity. Especially when an institution is in its beginning stages and Board members are the actual founders of the entity, it often becomes difficult for such Board members to relinquish power and authority. After putting in much time, effort, and often personal resources, turning over the enterprise to someone new and unrelated can be problematic. However, equally if not more problematic, is a situation where a Board member or an entire Board becomes permanent. While this might allow for a strong continuity of vision and mission, it can also lead to catastrophic breakdown if the Board is unable to appropriately adapt to the changing environment in which the maturing entity finds itself. As the school grows and changes, and new voices, new families, and new faculty

join the enterprise, their needs, desires, and insights must be taken into account or else the institution may develop a rift between its management and its customer base which can lead to increased conflict.

ISM's *Board Building* manual recommends three-year terms that can be renewed once, followed by at least one mandatory year off the Board (p.40). Such a dynamic allows for some sense of continuity without the danger of the Board becoming ossified or becoming seen as the personal property of a particular Board member or family. This enhances overall stability by ensuring accountability, flexibility, and institutional legitimacy. There may also be some wisdom in founding Boards enacting some sort of "sunset" provision, whereby they determine in advance when they will resign from the Boards and schools they are just beginning to form. These founders may then be designated as Board Emeritus members, who would be allowed to attend and speak at board meetings like regular members, but who would not have voting privileges.

Who Serves on the Board?

A further means of enhancing stability is to "profile" the school Board according to NCEA, ISM, and NAIS. This entails establishing a cultivation process which seeks to identify individuals and the specific resources and skills sets they can bring to the Board to help it accomplish its mission and fulfill the specific strategic plan. The idea is to extend Board membership beyond the realm of who knows who, and bring it into the realm of where can we find someone who supports the mission of the school who could help us accomplish "X". To this end many schools find it valuable to include on their Boards professionals who have experience in legal issues,

human resource development, accounting, and insurance. The idea is to match professional expertise with the school's long-term institutional needs.

In addition to professional expertise, ISM's *Board Building* also recommends ensuring that the Board in its overall makeup is conspicuously affluent or has access to affluence. Finding Board members who have demonstrable clout not only in the school's community but in the community at large can also be tremendously helpful to establishing legitimacy and stability (p.5). Most experts find it inappropriate for students to function as voting Board members as they may lack the time, resources, and skills necessary to help the Board fulfill its long-term vision. In addition, the Board must occasionally deal with topics of a sensitive or confidential nature which are inappropriate to share with the current student. Student input if desired at Board meetings can be obtained by other means. Most Boards also prohibit school employees or their relatives from holding Board membership due to potential conflict of interest.

The NCEA's Convey and Haney (1997) recommend a similar course of action for Board profiling (this is significant change from Catholic school Boards of the 1960s which were limited to clergy and/or parent membership.) They recommend looking for Board members who are able to make decisions, are willing to take risks to get them done, have the appropriate contacts, and are self-assured. It recommends looking for Board members who are strong and experienced leaders as well as people who are able to work towards unity, create and strengthen programs, foster a process of renewal within the organization, share the vision, and can heighten motivation and confidence of the group (p.45). The NCEA's Sheehan recommends restricting Board membership to those who are: at least 18 years old or greater, show a genuine interest

in Catholic schools and particular willingness to carry out the mission of the particular school they are serving, have the ability to work well with others, the willingness and ability to put in the necessary time commitments, the ability to maintain confidentiality, a high degree of integrity, and a sense of future vision for the school (p. 61).

Convey and Haney also recommend screening all Board members prior to approval. Some schools require that nominees complete a nomination form and submit a letter stating why they wish to serve or have the applicants interviewed prior to acceptance. The purpose of this interview is to gather information about the person's commitment to the program, the philosophy, and the work of the school and the Board (p. 46).

Some Boards have Ex Officio members who have a right to sit on the Board and have full access to all of its deliberations and decisions. Some schools also designate Board Emeritus members who typically have rights to attend meetings and offer input as regular Board members, but who do not have voting privileges. Independent school Boards may designate such positions to founders, important community members, or to well known personalities who can serve as "legitimizers" in school literature, but who due to distance or time constraints are not actually able to be actively involved on the Board.

Many schools struggle with the concept of the Head's role on the Board. Should not the Head have a vote? Some schools allow the Head to vote, however, many chose to keep a clear distinction between the Head and the Board. The Head is the Board's sole employee who is charged with carrying out the Board's broad direction. In a

healthy school the Board will consult the Head and give great weight to the Head's input, but at the end of the day, the Head does not cast an actual vote.

Board/Head Relations

A successful schools needs both powerful Board members and powerful chief executive (i.e., school Head). A clear separation of responsibilities between these powers is necessary to maintain balance, excellence, solvency, and strength. Modeling its recommendations on a type of business model, ISM in its *Board-Head Relationships* publication (2002) recommends that the school view its Board president as "chair of the Board," and the Head as the chief executive officer (CEO.) As the chief executive of the organization, the Head provides for the long-term implementation of the Board-generated strategic plan through its adaptation into the daily affairs of the school (p.38). This typically includes the power to make all personnel decisions and all hire/fire decisions. As long as the Head is acting in harmony with the school's mission, legal employment practices, and Board expectations regarding budgets and staff professionalism, the Board should stay out of specific hire/ fire decisions. The Head is responsible for handling issues related to the faculty and staff, the Board is responsible for handling issues related to the Head. There needs to be a clear chain of order in the school and a grievance procedure in place which instructs that conflicts should be resolved between the parities at the most intimate and direct level, before bringing the matter up the line.

Issues of what is being served for lunch and what techniques a teacher is using in a class should be handled by the principal and not the Board. Such issues can also distract from Board meetings which should be used to discuss critical long-term issues

and policy needs facing the school rather than the current “buzz” at the school. In its *The Board as a Strategic Entity*, ISM recommends that the Board work diligently to “park” day-to-day issues in the appropriate sub-committee or if necessary refer the issue to the executive committee or Head evaluation committee if it concerns a decision the Head made on a critical day-to-day issue which is having a larger impact on the school. Generally, the Board should shy away from in-depth discussions of such issues without ignoring them or wishing they would go away (p.46). Some would argue that since “the business of the school is in its classrooms,” that the Board should be involved intimately in classroom related issues. ISM’s view is that precisely because “the business of the school is in its classrooms,” the Board should stay out of the classroom and do all it can to allow the classroom (i.e., the teachers, the students, the Head) to focus on the classroom alone by taking care of non-classroom issues such as strategic planning, finance, property and facilities issues, marketing, and fundraising. By taking care of issues related to stability and solvency, the Board allows the administration and faculty to “establish and maintain mission-specific excellence in classrooms, and curricula, and in the teaching ranks of the institution” (p.46). Occasionally an operations-related crisis may result which demands Board attention, but for the most part the Board should seek to develop proactively, in conjunction with the Head, policies and procedures to address problems before they occur. Policies and procedures supported and developed by the Board outside of particular crises and individual classrooms can and will affect the education that transpires in those classrooms in a more orderly and effective way than in Board micromanagement of individual classroom crises.

Head Evaluation

ISM in Board-Head Relationships, The NCEA's Sheehan, and The NAIS's DeKuyper all recommend having a clear procedure and timeline for evaluating the Head. ISM specifically recommends evaluating the Head based on the schools strategic plan and the Head's ability to forward that plan. It recommends using written criteria, but avoiding a strict checklist format and varying the evaluative criteria as the school's needs and focus varies. Sheehan adds that the evaluation should include not just the perceptions of the Board members, but should include the perceptions of the teachers students and parents. Finally the evaluation should be "developmental, that is it should foster the development of the Head during the school year" (Board-Head Relations, p.4).

NCEA, NAIS and ISM all recommend using a Head evaluation committee to develop yearly objectives for the Head based on the schools strategic plan and the professional development needs of the Head. The objectives that are set should be limited, clear, and provide for some type of measure or assessment. Sheehan recommends that the evaluation look at both professional growth and competency of the Head. The evaluation should allow for mutual trust and respect and should provide the Head with a forum for response (p.45). ISM (Board Head Relationships, p.9) recommends that this Head evaluation committee be made up of three persons who have successful management experience, have a reputation for being supportive, and who are devoid of private agendas. The Head may be allowed to select one of the three members.

The NCEA's Shaughnessy in *A Primer on School Law* (1988) advises Board to remain vigilant in their evaluative practices for the good of all involved. By keeping the evaluations clear, formal, and consistent, the Board can help insure institutional stability and its relationship with the Head. Clear communication about expectations before hand can help avoid catastrophic breakdowns and summary dismissals later. Shaughnessy states that it is both immoral and quite possibly illegal to rescind a Head's contract without having first provided the Head with feedback and a chance to correct any deficiencies (p. 31). Thus if a Board is unsatisfied with Head's performance in some area, it is critical that is concerned be addressed charitably and forthrightly and that a plan of remediation be put in place before any formal termination is considered.

What should the Balance of Power be Between The Board and the Head?

The balance of power between the Board and the Head is a complex and evolving dynamic that is idiosyncratic to each school community. While there is some debate about whether schools are better off with strong Heads and weak Boards, or weak Boards and strong Heads, striking a balance between the two seems the most prudent course. Ledyard (1987) in looking at the governance of independent private day schools found that a high-level Board activity was indicative of an overall healthy Board/Head relationship. Frequent interaction helped develop a high degree of trust which permitted the Board and the Head to negotiate both minor and major issues. Ledyard also found that the Board was most effective when it kept in touch with various school constituencies and engaged in systematic formal valuation of the Head. His belief is that powerful Head ships while perhaps resulting in less Board controversy nevertheless lead to less communication and ultimately less school stability.

Ledyard references Callahan's (1962) superintendent vulnerability thesis posits that in order to survive, superintendents or other school leaders have to please their most powerful and vocal critics and therefore may be more inclined to follow public opinion and pressure regarding educational issues and policies rather than detached and sound pedagogy. Survivability is enhanced by caution, protective bureaucracy, and inertia according to this thesis. This suggests that Heads, who function essentially as local superintendents, who wish to survive would be wise to lay low and cede power to the Board.

This view of strong Board/weak Head as providing for best stability is challenged by Reefer (1999) in an unpublished dissertation at Harvard University entitled *The Relationship between an Independent School Board and its Headmaster*. Reefer looks at the specific dynamics at play in an elite Ivy League prep school and concludes that a powerful Head who can co-opt a weak Board provides for greatest stability. He tracks how each uses the other to legitimize their efforts, with the Head coming out holding the power. At the core of this relationship is the attempt of the Board and the Headmaster to privatize conflict and to give the impression of the school as a contented place.

In the case of this school, after severe crisis of governance, a very powerful and influential community figure on the Board moved in to restructure the governance of the school. This Board member felt strongly that the previous instability in the school was a result of the Board intervening too much in the schools daily affairs. Under his direction the school hired (at significant expense) a seasoned and powerful Headmaster and gave him significant authority to the point where the Board's role became largely

ceremonial. The goal was to make the Board symbolic and a tool for legitimizing the decisions of the Headmaster. The Board's responsibility was basically reduced to picking the Headmaster and reviewing his work every year. The dynamic which developed was that the school was so dependent on the Headmaster that Board members feared any possibility of losing him and thus would placate and acquiesce to his demands.

The Head's powers included affecting the nomination and selection of the Board members (who technically function as his boss), including the Board president, and directing the terms of his own evaluation. The Head clearly had full control of employment issues regarding the faculty. Through developing a persona of competence and control and through considerable political ability, the Head was successful in maintaining a perception of control and power which essentially went unchallenged. The formation of an executive committee of Board members which ostensibly worked closely with the Head allowed for the perception to remain the Board retained control over the Head, when in fact the Head retained virtually all powers of decision-making. In the case of this elite prep school this power dynamic worked for both the Board and the Head in their efforts to project the school as a place of contentment, even though significant unresolved problems remained.

Regardless of who retains more power, the Head does play a significant role in Board dynamics. Because some new Board members will most probably lack previous Board experience or specific experience in running a school, the Head can and often does provide some "on the job training" for such individuals and thus can shape their experience. However, such efforts at training and educating the Board take a significant

amount of time and energy from the Head: time and energy that now cannot be spent on the day-to-day operation of the school such as teaching, advising, and curriculum development.

Griffin (1999) in his unpublished dissertation, *The Changing Roles and Responsibilities of the Independent School Headmaster*, examines how the Head's responsibilities are becoming more and more focused on handling external constituencies rather than the day-to-day operations at the classroom level. Griffin shows how successful Head's of schools today must focus increasingly on "the outside" constituencies (Board of Trustees, alumni, and local community). Adaptation of existing mission to changing opportunities, development of market plans, exploration of imaginative liaisons with other organizations and communities, management of auxiliary enterprises linked to the school, cultivation of constituents, and solicitation of major gaps all quickly absorb the Head's day. Griffin confirms this by pointing to the high turnover rate for most boards (as high as 1/3rd of the board per year if they are on a typical three year cycle of terms). Griffin found that Headmasters reported a significant increase in the amount of time and effort they must spend educating, training, and communicating with members of the Board of Trustees in order to properly form the Board in an effort to enhance the stability of the school and their own longevity as Headmaster. Headmasters strongly believe the well-educated Board was a well-functioning Board and that a positive relationship between the Boards and Headmaster provides long-term positive benefits for the institution and Headmaster. Griffin also found that The Headmaster Board President relationship was singled out for importance in the smooth functioning of the school in the retention of Headmasters.

Increased duties, responding to the needs and demands of a new breed of “consumer parent,” stress, overwork, and overall job instability, leads to significant Head turnover in independent schools. Griffin references a 1996 NAIS study of Head tenure which suggests that most independent schools undergo a change of Head every three to five years. He concludes his study by pointing out the importance of the multiple constituencies in an independent school clearly understanding the difficulties and intricacies involved in being a school Head.

What are some Key Indicators of Board Effectiveness?

Convey and Haney’s NCEA sponsored research identifies three factors that consistently emerged as important contributors to the perceived effectiveness of Boards: 1. Communication 2. Ownership and 3.) Effective committees.

Communication is the most consistent indicator of Board effectiveness according to this survey. Boards are key ambassadors for the school. They are to some degree the public face of the school. As such, Board members need to be properly informed, articulate, and professional in their communications regarding the school. According to this study all types of Boards show significant relationships between perceived effectiveness and communication with faculty, parents, parent groups, students, and the local community.

Another critical characteristic of effective Boards according to the study is that they take “ownership.” Of the school. By this it is meant that the Board members believe that they are real stakeholders the endeavor. They see a connection between their involvement on the Board and long-range positive effects on children and the community. They are involved in crafting and affirming the school’s philosophy and mission and set the agenda for the school through long and short range planning. They

do this in an environment which provides them with the opportunity to articulate both their support and their nonsupport (along with their reasons) on any issue facing the school (Convey & Haney p. 47).

A third indicator of effectiveness according to the NCEA study is effective committees. While Board committees are overseen by an actual Board member, the committees themselves may be comprised of non-Board experts and volunteers. Many Boards have an executive committee, made up of only Board members, which serves as a Board management unit. This committee responds to emergency situations when the entire Board is not in session, but which are reported at the next Board meeting for action in accordance with the Board's direction. This committee often sets the Head's salary and compensation and conducts the evaluation of the Head. Many Boards also have a nominating committee which helps surface new potential Board members, orient new Board members, and provides for the ongoing education and development of all Board members. Boards typically have a finance committee which develops the details of a strategic financial plan and oversees the financial components of the school. NAIS's DeKuyper stresses, however, that all Board members retain fiduciary responsibility for the school and should understand and approve finance committee documents carefully (p.20). Some schools have a fundraising/ development committee which oversees and coordinates all large and small fund-raising activity. Many Boards have a policy committee which reviews current policies and makes recommendations regarding any necessary changes additions or deletions. Some also have a separate marketing committee. Each of these committees helps the board fulfill its two primary functions: Policy Formation and Planning.

What is the Board's Role and Responsibility in Policy

Sheehan (p.15), describes policy as providing guidelines for discretionary action by the Head which states what should be done, not how it should be done. Typically the Board's role is to formulate the policy (usually with significant input from the Head), and it is the Head's role to enact it, although there is some give-and-take in this area. NAIS recommends that the Board take the lead in developing policies relating to: the mission statement, bylaws, internal Board proceedings, investing guidelines, budget guidelines. In conjunction with the Head NAIS advises developing policies on issues of enrollment, employment, buildings and grounds, crisis plans, and financial procedures. Policies best left to the head, according to NAIS include admission processes and decisions, administrative and faculty staffing, job descriptions, and evaluation, student code of conduct, and curricular and extracurricular development and activities (p. 49).

It is important that whenever policies are enacted they are relevant, simple, clear, cogent, written down, communicated to all, and regularly evaluated. The policies should be written in such a way that they give general direction to the Head, are helpful in forestalling crisis, clarify expectations, preserve the Board's decisions, and protect against potential subjectivity, inconsistency, and arbitrariness. They should not be used as an attempt to control or supervise the administration, resolve problems after the fact, address isolated or insignificant items, or substitute for programs (Sheehan, p.18).

With nonprofit corporate law, educational licensing and regulations, charitable solicitation laws, labor and employment laws and health and safety codes according to DeKuyper. Shaughnessy (1988) writing for the NCEA in its publication, *A Primer On*

School: A Guide For Board Members Of Catholic Schools, emphasizes that the Board should take its role in policy formation seriously as according to they can be held personally liable if they knew or should have known that a certain policy or action violated a person's rights. Since most lawsuits arising in schools are negligence cases, the Board should develop clear policies regarding safety and supervision (Shaughnessy, p. 36). It is particularly important for the Board to be aware of safety issues anywhere on the school grounds. If a Board member knows or should have known that a potentially dangerous situation existed at the school (i.e., such as a playground in serious disrepair, or fundamental lack of supervision) and fails to address it, the Board can be held liable. School Board members should familiarize themselves with the law as it affects schools. As the school Board is the developer of policy, it must understand the legal ramifications of the presence or lack of specific policies in significant areas. A good general rule is that the Board should always act in a manner that is respectful of the dignity, rights, and safety of all of those in Catholic schools (Shaughnessy page 36). It is particularly important that the Board have clear and written policies for dealing with any life changing event: specifically expulsion and employee termination. While Catholic schools are not held to the same set of law as public schools or to the same degree of constitutional jurisprudence, courts will insist that they conduct their business in accord with basic fairness, fundamental reasonableness, due process, and common-law practices. All handbooks and policies should be reviewed annually, and be considered for serious revision every three to five years as a regular part of the school's planning cycle.

What is the Board Role and Responsibility in Planning?

The Board's second main function in addition to Policy is Planning. The Board should develop a strategic plan which outlines the school's major goals and needs in both a five-year and longer term plan. DeKuyper is insistent that all planning be in complete harmony with the schools concise and well thought out mission statement. Everything the school does and plans should be constantly evaluated in light of the clearly stated goals which are at the heart of any good mission statement. The NCEA's elementary school finance manual suggests asking the following simple questions as a school attempts to develop its own plan: Where have we been? What factors have influenced our historical development? Where we today and why? Where we going and why? How we going to get there? Long-range strategic planning requires assessing the school in its current situation and setting a vision for where the school wants to go. Each plan item should include a cost estimate and the revenue source which will be tapped to finance the item. It should also assign responsibility for the implementation of the item, and give an estimate of the time frame in which the item will be addressed.

Among the strategic issues the document should address are:

- The student-related issues of: enrollment, tuition levels, tuition assistance levels, class size, student demographic balance.
- The faculty related issues of: salary levels, benefits packages, and professional growth.
- The administrative issues of: broad school staffing needs, business office needs, development office needs, counseling needs.
- The financial issues of: long-term budget projections, cash reserves, endowments, percent of operations expense covered by hard income, and fundraising.
- The community relations issues of: parent communication, parent education, alumni development, civic interaction area.
- The facilities related issues of: facility expansion, facilities renovation, the development and implementation of the technology plan. (ISM, The Board as a Strategic Entity, p.6).

Once in place the plan should be reviewed, refined, and updated on an annual basis. It becomes a guiding document which is then used to structure financial obligations and evaluate the performance of the Board, the school, the principal, and the staff.

Finally, Boards Should be Self -Critical

Both ISM and NCEA highly recommend that Board be deliberate and consistent about self- evaluation and how the Board is conducting business. The Board should examine how it operates as a group: including looking at its leadership, membership, degree of participation, committee functioning, and meeting efficiency. It should also look at its performance in preparing and following through on strategic plan, finance, policy, and its relation with all of the school's stakeholders. The Board should annually examine its records and notes to ensure that all its paperwork is in order. ISM recommends that the Board should seek to establish a "Board Memory" by establishing a basic historical portrait of the Board's activities in relation to the school (Annual Cycles and Board Committees, p.23) This listing of critical strategic events and benchmarks, both positive and negative, can help future Board members understand how and when the school has organized as it has and come to be the community they now see.

Resources

Convey J. & Haney, R. (1997). *Benchmarks of excellence effective boards of Catholic education*. National Catholic Education Association, Washington: D.C.

DeKuyper, M. (1998) *Trustee handbook: a guide to effective governance for independent school boards*, National Association of Independent Schools, Washington D.C.

Griffin, C. (1999). *The changing role and responsibilities of the independent school headmaster*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle: WA.

Independent School Management Compendia Series. (2002). *The strategic boards series: board head relationships: the board as the strategic entity: board building: stability markers and board self-assessment: annual cycles and board committees*. ISM Publications. Wilmington: DE.

Reefer, T. (1991). *The relationship between an independent school board and its headmaster*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Harvard University, Harvard: MA

Shaughnessy, M. (1988). *A primer on school law: a guide for members in Catholic schools*. National Catholic Education Association, Washington: D.C.

Sheehan, L. (1990) *Building better boards a handbook for board members in Catholic education*. National Catholic Education Association, Washington: to D.C.

Voogd, B. (1996) *Parental involvement in decision-making in independent schools*. Unpublished masters thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton: Alberta