

# Building Your Board

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## Introduction

One of the most common questions when we consult with schools—whether the school is new or old, tiny or huge—is “How do we grow our board?”

In an era of falling volunteerism and greater responsibility and liability for board members, it is getting harder and harder to find new board members. Gone are the days of having lots of potential board members to choose from; instead it is becoming more and more important for boards to be proactive in approaching new board members.

A 2016 survey of 1,000 business managers in schools in Australia, undertaken by the Bursars Forum, found that over 39% of all schools (not just Christian schools) highlighted finding quality board members as a major challenge faced by their school. Another board survey, also conducted by the Bursars Forum, found that the typical board, per its constituting documents, should consist of between 4 and 12 board members—but, on average, had only 8.

From these surveys alone, it would appear that keeping a fully stocked board with good board members is a major issue for schools!

## Growing Your Board

There are two key aspects in the growth of a board:

1. Numeric growth—i.e., new board members
2. Developing the existing board and its members

The first element—identifying, cultivating, and inducting new board members—is the main subject of this article. This element also requires that board members know when their time on the board is at an end, and that they work at replacing themselves rather than just holding on to keep the organization alive. The rapid or *en masse* exit of long-term board members can present its own challenges, namely a dramatic loss of corporate memory and a potential power vacuum.

The second element involves deliberate work by the board—often by the board chair—and not by the CEO or management team. This becomes a matter for ongoing professional development and appraisal of the board as it does its work; boards must not fall prey to the temptation of thinking they know all there is to know about governing a school.

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## Role of the Board in Community Governance

Through the development and use of the community governance framework, we have seen that the role of the board is critical as part of a relational community—which every school is!

The key role for the board has two main aspects:

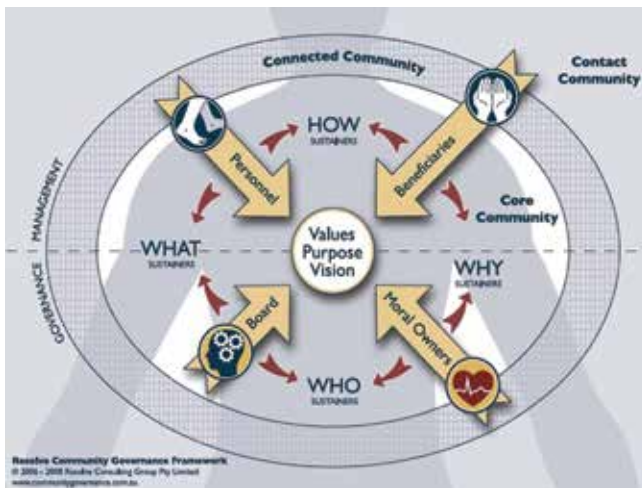
1. As a link:

- Between the community and its moral owners (think of the founders, church, or other group to which the board is accountable for the fulfillment of the school's purpose and vision). The board puts legs onto why we run the ministry of a school and who is going to make it happen.
- Between the community and its personnel (whether paid or volunteers), including the CEO. The board makes sure that what we do as a school has purpose and direction. It is important to make sure that the board does not get involved in how we do things, lest they cross over to management issues rather than sticking to governance.

2. As keepers of the school's higher purpose. The board is responsible for the direction of a school, and therefore needs to put a great deal of thought not only into the strategic direction of the school, but also into formulating and articulating the purpose, vision, and values of the school. It should not abdicate this responsibility to management.

One of the things that really hampers the long-term health of any organization is the lack of specific moral owners. These moral owners must go beyond the board members themselves for long-term sustainability. It is important that a board not only be accountable beyond itself, but also that the moral owners become the pool from which future board members can be drawn. Moral owners are sold out to the purpose, vision, and values of the school.

We have seen quite often that the lack of moral owners actually means that a board becomes less effective and has real problems finding new board members after the first generation moves on.



*If you would like to learn more about this model, Community Governance is available through Purposeful Design Publications or directly from Resolve.*

## Using a Board Skills Matrix

When the topic of new board members comes up at meetings, it's often a low priority. It often involves everyone looking blankly at each other, and the suggested names come exclusively from within our own limited circles. Worst of all, very little progress is made toward actually finding new board members!

A simple tool that helps boards get started is a board skills matrix: a simple representation of the things board members feel are currently lacking. Think about issues such as:

- Gender
- Age
- Time served on the board
- Details of representatives (if you have them)
- Length of term limits (if you have them)
- Range of skills that would help make the board work

## The board makes sure that what we do as a school has purpose and direction.

Have each board member list their own competencies and what things they perceive the board to be currently lacking. Putting all these in two matrices—what we have now and what we need—will highlight gaps on your board. Making the gaps apparent can give a frame of reference and turn board discussions into a focused survey of specific needs, rather than a disorganized brainstorm of potential board members.

Such an approach will highlight gaps and risks that the board faces, and can even provide you with an opportunity to come up with a “bench” of board members you may need later.

It is critical to ensure right at the outset that any prospective board members align with the school's statement of faith, vision, values, and purpose. Just having the right skills is not sufficient for potential board members; they need to be sold out on where you want to go as a school.

## Inducting and Orienting New Board Members

Once you have a list of potential board members, the real work begins. Depending on the process required to have someone join your school board (election or appointment), you'll need to get started meeting with, sounding out, inducting, and orienting new board members, giving particular attention to laying out the school's purpose and vision. This process should commence before a person joins the board.

Usually, a conversation with the board chairman and/or the CEO (i.e., administrator, head of school, headmaster, principal, etc.) as to where the school is going, its key goals and issues, etc., is very important even before someone joins a board. You need to find a good fit!



The use of a board policy handbook at this stage or even at a subsequent orientation is important not just for the board, but also for new board members: will they fit the culture of the board and operate in accordance with board policies? This also helps them come up to speed as soon as they join the board.

In our experience, it often takes new board members at least 12 months to come up to speed fully on all the issues a board faces. Careful induction and orientation can shorten this timeframe and make the new board members far more comfortable in the process.

New board members are actually healthy for boards to have around; not only do they bring fresh ideas and contributions, but they also get to ask all the silly questions, and perhaps questions that longer term board members are afraid to ask. It is important that new board members are not made to feel inferior in board meetings; their questions should be encouraged. In fact, the chair needs to make sure they are included in all discussions.

While it is great to have long-term corporate memory on the board, it is also important that they be given an opportunity to rotate out and make sure the board remains fresh at all times. A long-term board member is not necessarily a good board member.

## Conclusion

A healthy board needs to grow not only numerically but also in its skills and knowledge. If a board is talking about issues that it always has, then not only the board, but the school

as a whole could be in trouble. Ensuring that the school is fulfilling its vision and purpose is absolutely critical—the board is responsible for these aspects on behalf of the moral owners of the school.

In the ACSI Flourishing Schools Model, some markers of a flourishing school are:

- A functioning strategic board
- Ongoing board professional development
- Annual board evaluation (of the board)
- Ongoing planning process in place
- Board policies systematically reviewed and revised
- Policy guides key decisions

To self-diagnose, ask: when did you as a board last talk about these types of issues? When did you spend time together on a board retreat? When did you undertake some governance training together? When did you read a book or article on how to be a better board? Are you proactive as a board in building the board up, or are you reactive?

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## References

- Cabban, S.K., and P. Campey. 2016. "Challenges Facing Schools." The Bursars Forum.
- Cabban, S.K., and P. Campey. 2015. "Board Survey." The Bursars Forum.

