

Flourishing Board Governance

Stephen Dill

"There are three sides to every story: yours, mine, and the facts."

When board governance goes wrong, it's common to hear school heads reflect, "I did not get much input and feedback from my board, but the little I received was positive. And then at the end of the school year, they said they wanted to move in a different direction."

Sometimes, I hear the other side from a board member: "He was a nice guy who loved the Lord, but an ineffective leader," or, "We totally lost trust in him when"

The Flourishing Schools Framework starts with board governance because ultimate authority and final decision making sits with the board. Effective board governance can significantly strengthen a school's ability to deliver strong student outcomes over time; failed board governance goes in the opposite direction, usually resulting in weaker student outcomes. What happens at the board table will impact students—positively or negatively.

In light of this, school heads and boards must acknowledge three important challenges:

1. **The challenge of Christian school leadership.** The head of school role is difficult and often thankless. Many school heads rarely—if ever—receive meaningful encouragement from their boards. Boards that view their role strictly in terms of oversight and accountability will inevitably focus on "snooping" rather than support. Boards should understand that "it is lonely at the top." A person who accepts a board position should commit to never publicly criticize their school head—whether in the school parking lot, the grocery store aisle, or in a private conversation with a school parent. Their criticism and coaching should be done privately with the school head or within official board meetings. In conversations with parents about school issues, effective board members always direct parents to communicate directly with the school head (or the appropriate school leader) regarding the issue.
2. **The challenge of "leading up."** Generally, heads of school have more training and awareness of the proper role of the board than board members do—yet the head of school is the board's employee. Often board chairs and board members know much about "how we have always done this" and less about best practices in governance. Flourishing school boards are serious about professional development for the board. Because boards often have rotating members, effective orientation and ongoing education are essential as well.
3. **The communication challenge.** The most important relationship in schools is the relationship between the board chair and the head of school. School relationships depend on open communication just as much as husband-wife or parent-child relationships. There should be frequent dialogue between the board chair and the head—not just at the board meeting. The head of school deserves constructive feedback from the board, and the wise board chair listens to the opinions and counsel of the school head. In the past few months, four different school heads recently released from their positions told me that they had positive reviews by their boards (some with formal renewal of a contract) before being told that their services

were no longer needed. Sometimes school heads may be ineffective and need coaching or eventual dismissal, but it is unethical to release a school head without ever providing performance feedback along the way. Trust is the glue that holds relationships together, whether at home or at school.

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This is not an exhaustive list—there are many other challenges that come with board governance. There are micromanaging school boards that do not understand the role differential between board and administration. At the other extreme are absentee boards that do not live up to the title of “trustee” because they have no sense of what is going on at the school and blindly accept everything the head tells them. Ronald Reagan’s “trust but verify” serves as a helpful guideline for boards.

In addition, flourishing school boards pay attention to all four strands of the board governance continuum:

1. **Foundations.** Most Christian school boards have foundational documents (mission, vision, values, statement of faith, student outcomes) in place. Effective boards review those documents periodically, primarily as important reminders of why Christ-centered education is worth the investment of adequate resources.
2. **Policies.** Effective boards realize that they have not communicated unless they have done so in writing. Boards that rely on the longest-serving board member’s memory have not communicated expectations clearly to the head of school. Wise boards incorporate the head’s advice in shaping policies; wise heads of school realize that they are responsible for implementing those policies effectively. A well-organized and current board policy manual is a prerequisite to orienting new board members.
3. **Board development.** This strand is an area of weakness for many boards. A board profile is a written description of what an ideal board looks like for a school, including both individual qualities and a total board profile. It is helpful to have financial, educational, pastoral, facility, and general business expertise on a board. However, personal spiritual maturity and deep commitment to the mission of the school are more important prerequisites than occupational expertise. Implied in a board profile is an organizational structure that pays attention to identifying and recruiting mission-appropriate board members. That may be a task for a separate nominations committee, executive committee, governance committee, or “committee on trustees.” This committee

should be responsible for all of the elements of this strand: recruiting new board members, organizing board training, and carrying out annual evaluations of the board.

4. **Board and head of school roles.** Effective boards have one employee: the head of school. Having multiple individuals (e.g., school head and business manager) reporting to the board can create significant managerial problems. An effective board has a clear job description for the head of school, as well as clarity regarding what belongs to the board and what belongs to the staff.

Lastly, I must address some important questions not specifically mentioned in the Flourishing Schools Framework:

1. **Does ACSI recommend any particular models of board governance?** ACSI does not endorse any specific model, but there are several helpful publications that describe an overall model for board governance. Over the years, many schools and nonprofit organizations have adopted policy governance, sometimes referred to as the “Carver Model” (Carver 1997). When properly understood and implemented, this can be an effective governance model; its specific strength is the clarity provided in distinguishing between the role of the board and the role of the head. When these roles are wrongly understood, school heads can avoid transparency with the board and move in an authoritarian leadership style. When applied improperly, however, the model can create an insurmountable “wall” between the board and the staff.

ACSI offers two publications using similar concepts. *Mission Directed: Governing Your Christian School with Purpose* (Stob 2015) is written by a former head of school who describes his school’s change from a traditional model—where the board was involved in too many details and, therefore, focused on the wrong priorities—to a policy-based model that focused on achieving the mission of the school. *Community Governance* (Bartlett and Campey 2008), written by two Australian Christian school leaders, provides a model that defines the “moral owners” of a school and the resulting proper roles of a governance board and school staff.
2. **Who is responsible for overall strategic planning for the school?** The answer to this question depends on what is meant by strategic planning. There is a difference between true strategic financial planning (primarily a board responsibility) and strategic operational planning (primarily a staff responsibility). In any model, the board must see to it that plans are being made for the future. In my experience, the most effective strategic planning is led (either formally or informally) by the head of school and has strong board involvement. A common weakness in strategic planning is failing to address the financial

resources that will be needed to implement the plan. Tuition levels and financial aid policies are board issues; curriculum development and staffing decisions belong to the school head and his or her team.

3. **Should board members be expected to give money and raise money for the school?** Traditional independent school wisdom says that every trustee should possess at least two of the “three W’s”: work, wealth, and wisdom. (All Christian school board members should also possess spiritual maturity and a deep commitment to Christian schooling.) All board members should be willing to “work” by faithful attendance at board meetings and additional volunteer assignments as needed. Every board member should also be giving financial support (gifts over and above tuition payments) as their means permit. (Every board member should be a donor.) It is unwise to make wealth a requirement for board membership; nor should it be viewed as a disadvantage if God has blessed a particular family and they are able to give generously. The primary issue is godly wisdom, not material wealth. However, all board members should understand the significance of voluntary financial gifts, and support efforts by the school and the board to raise funds. This could take the form of accompanying other board members or school leaders in solicitations, as well as supporting school personnel who work in the development or advancement areas. Board members should understand the 80/20 reality: usually 80% or more of voluntary gift support comes from 20% (or even 5%) of the donors.

Conclusion

The mission of your Christian school is worthy of excellence

Effective boards have one employee: the head of school.

in delivery. Although the men and women on the frontlines of offices and classrooms are critically important, excellence begins with the board and the head of school. School boards are fiduciary trustees entrusted with a sacred mission. Every Christian school board should seek to be a flourishing school board in order to achieve that mission with excellence.

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References

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The Flourishing School Continuum: Growing Stronger Version 1.0; July 2015

This model provides a high-level summary for school improvement. Few schools are likely to fit every category within a level: this is a continuum from a formative level of school characteristics to a flourishing level. Schools may meet Flourishing standards in some areas but operate at a Formative stage in others. All schools should strive to reach Effective or higher. The red line down the middle of the chart represents accreditation.

Domains	Elements	Formative Level	Maturing Level	Effective Level	Flourishing Level
Board Governance	Foundations	Undocumented mission, vision, values, or philosophy	Developing vision, mission, core values, and philosophy	Clear statements and full alignment of mission, vision, values, and philosophy	Clear statements and alignment; regular review and refinement
	Policies	Little or no written board policy; functioning on bylaws	Basic board policies in place	Clear and written board governance policy; consistent implementation	Board policies systematically reviewed and revised; policy guides key decisions
	Board Development	Board directly involved in management decisions; little review of board function, future planning, or board profiling	Board growing in its understanding of its proper role; some future planning in place; general board profile in place	Board has clear recruitment and nomination processes; some board PD; strategic plan and profile in place	Functioning strategic board that reflects board profile; ongoing board PD; annual board evaluation (of the board); ongoing planning processes
	Roles and HOS	No clear delineation of board and head of school (HOS) roles	Clear definition of board and HOS roles; clear HOS job description	Stable, positive board/HOS relationship; clear HOS evaluation process	Ongoing board/HOS communication and positive relationship; comprehensive and systematic HOS evaluation process
Executive Leadership	Framework	Limited expertise in the Christian School Leadership Framework (CSLF)	Qualified/credentialed HOS; utilizing the CSLF to build the school and governance culture	HOS demonstrates many "heart, relational, and strategic competencies" of the CSLF; keeps board informed	HOS embodies the CSLF; contributes to the Christian school movement; supports board; regularly reports strategic plan to board and community
	Personnel	Limited capacity or support in recruitment and evaluation of school personnel	Some recruitment and support (coaching or mentoring); inconsistent evaluation processes	Developing recruitment strategies; employee support; annual performance reviews	Intentional recruitment strategies; robust formative and summative performance reviews; linked to professional development
	Stability and Engagement	High turnover in HOS position	Reasonable stability of HOS; engaged with some stakeholders; effective board engagement	Stability in HOS position; strong engagement with all stakeholders; engagement with external communities	Consistent HOS leadership; HOS inspires the community; is highly respected by stakeholders, networks and blesses other schools, and has vision for Kingdom support
	Operating Systems	Lax financial controls; no external reviews; no attention to risk management; little to no tuition assistance	Feasible financial plans in place; some external financial review; limited risk management; tuition assistance available	Review/audit by external CPA; clear budgeting, reporting, attention to risk management; tuition assistance implemented and assessed; strategic financial plan	Hard-income driven; regular audits; meet ECEA standards; significant funding for tuition assistance; thorough risk management process; rolling strategic financial planning process
School Viability	Advancement	No formal admissions or development processes or staffing; use of fund-raising sales/events	Beginning donor cultivation; written admissions process	Some advancement staff in place; some successful fund-raising efforts; mission-driven admissions policies	Mature development/admissions functions; successful annual fund, capital campaigns, endowment
	Financial Resources	Financial viability in question; cash flow and debt concerns; no formal budget process	Formal budgeting process; debt manageable	Financially viable; balanced budget evident; growing cash reserve; debt reduction plan in place	Cash reserves >5% of budget; debt service <5% of budget; long-term financial viability evident
	Facilities	Inadequate, insufficient facilities; low-level functionality	Adequate facilities; developing educationally usable spaces	Well-developed and appealing physical plant; branding is evident	Physical plant supporting all programs; distinctive presence and branding

Domains	Elements	Formative Level	Maturing Level	Effective Level	Flourishing Level
Student Learning	Curriculum	"Off the shelf" curriculum in use; no systematic review	Basic curriculum in place; some systematic review; moving to comprehensive documentation	Clear scope and sequence; fully documented curriculum; strong faculty involvement in processes	Curriculum fully mapped and fully integrated with biblical worldview; regularly and collaboratively reviewed
	Exceptional Students	Little differentiation; no ability to serve exceptional students	Some differentiation; limited ability to serve exceptional needs	Differentiation evident; programs and services available to meet needs of exceptional students	Differentiation pervasive; programs and services for exceptional students effective and assessed at all levels
	Expected Student Outcomes (ESOs)	No identified outcomes; little or no clarity or consensus on ESOs	Basic objectives/goals for ESOs are documented; full ESOs not developed	Well-defined, communicated ESOs in all areas of student development; some assessments available (internal and external) for the ESOs	Well-communicated ESOs embedded into curriculum driving all programmatic decisions; analysis of ESO assessments drives school improvement
	Assessment of Learning	No external assessments of student learning	Some use of standardized assessments; minimal analysis, use of data, or tracking of graduates	Annual tracking of internal and external assessments; basic data analysis and use of test results to improve instruction	Annual analysis of internal and external assessments; tracking of student success at the next level; school improvement built on student assessment information
	Biblical Worldview	Little intentional biblical integration (other than the textbooks)	Developing biblical integration; some training of faculty	Biblical integration evident in curriculum documents and in planned and unplanned activities	Biblical integration pervasive; strong evidence of a biblical worldview developed and assessed
	Cocurricular	No cocurricular options	Limited cocurricular options	Many cocurricular options	Abundant cocurricular options in broad areas
	Technology	Minimal or no technology	Limited technology available	Current technology used and integrated into instruction; regular staff training	Pervasive use; training and evaluation of technology for staff and students in all areas of instruction
Spiritual Formation	Climate	More incidental than intentional; control; conformity	Some goal statements; grace and truth culture unbalanced	Clear outcomes for spiritual formation; balanced grace and truth culture	Student spiritual leadership evident; embedded grace and truth culture
	Parent and Church Partners	No intentional training for parents or church involvement	Encouragement of biblical parenting and church involvement	Intentional but informal teaching regarding biblical parenting and church involvement	Formal teaching/mentoring to develop biblical parenting and church involvement
	Assessment	Formative; no data collected	Anecdotal data on spiritual growth	Some data (surveys, follow-up) on student and alumni spiritual growth	Ongoing external assessments of spiritual climate, student outcomes, alumni
	Ministry/Service Opportunities	Occasional opportunities	Planned but inconsistent opportunities	Students have ministry, service, or discipleship opportunities	Significant school ministry resource commitment; multiple opportunities
School Culture	Faculty Culture	Some faculty not qualified; significant employee turnover	Qualified faculty; mixed employee morale; limited turnover	Stable, well-qualified, committed faculty; positive employee culture	Mission-driven, qualified faculty and administration; culture of mutual respect and support
	PD Culture	Little planning or time allotment for professional growth	Limited, unfocused professional development; individually initiated; "a la carte" approach	Faculty engaged in regular, systematic professional development; resourced adequately	Clear evidence of holistic, comprehensive, well-resourced professional development culture
	Organization	Minimal organizational structure	Some systems, policies, and structures	Documented systems, policies, structures, assessments	Actions based on ongoing assessments of student, faculty, and school cultures
	Student Culture	Fragile student culture	Developing student culture; limited sense of school pride/ownership	Positive student culture and sense of school pride/ownership	Clear evidence of positive student leadership; supportive student body
External	Accreditation	Little interest in accreditation	STAR, candidacy, or in process	REACH 2.0 (option for dual regional)	REACH + Regional + Exemplary Accreditation