

Healthy Boards, Healthy Schools: Recognizing the Connection, Acting on the Reality

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Growth is not the only metric Christian schools consider when determining their health. However, many schools measure part of their success and sustainability by how well the school is doing in attracting new students and retaining those currently enrolled. There are numerous reasons and definite strategies from enrollment, management, and marketing perspectives that will impact growth. Often overlooked in this discussion is the health of the governing board and how the board relates to and interacts with the head of school.

This school year (2017–2018) Providence Christian Academy in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, grew approximately 27 percent from the previous year. While there are numerous reasons for this growth—chief among them being that God has blessed PCA in ways far beyond our ability to imagine—much of the credit for this growth is directly attributable to having an exceptionally healthy governing board.

The governing board is not typically recognized or credited as a reason for school growth; but if we reflect on a few of the more important responsibilities of the board, then the correlation becomes apparent. Without question, among the most valued roles of the board are (1) to work together as a team and (2) to support the head of school.

The meaningful acceptance and understanding of these two huge roles cannot be overestimated. And yet schools often fail to see the warning signs of how discord, poor performance, lack of knowledge regarding best practices, and failure to adequately support the head can lead to a number of negative consequences, including no growth or even declining enrollment.

While acknowledging the correlation and connection between the health of the board and issues like school growth, there are definitely cases where the board is unhealthy, perhaps even dysfunctional, and yet the school is thriving. How can this be? It is the exception—not the norm. The answer for this unusual circumstance can likely be found in exceptional administrative leadership. This can be the case if the head of school is a strong leader and the leaders that he or she works with function as a team with a high level of effectiveness and efficiency. It could be argued that the absence of support, encouragement, collaboration, and trust coming from the board forces the school's leadership to more clearly focus on what needs to be done to ensure the health of the school. To be sure, it is a challenge for the school's head and other leaders; but if the right leadership team is in place, they may be able to compensate for a weak, ineffective board.



Governing boards that desire to adhere to best practices are in a position to realize that there is a connection between effective board leadership, effective school leadership, and the health of both the board and the school. To begin with, boards have three very specific and fundamental responsibilities. First, it is mandatory that the board develop and approve the mission of the school. While the board may seek input regarding wording, phraseology, or intent, in the end it accepts responsibility for the mission statement, which gives purpose and direction to the school. Second, the board must accept fiduciary responsibility for the school. It is its role to ensure that the school is financially sustainable. This includes approval of the budget as well as advancing the strategy for long-term growth. The function of tuition, annual giving, capital giving, endowments, and all forms of revenue generation ultimately lands at the door of the governing board. Third, the board hires the head of school and supports that individual to the best of its ability. While changes in leadership must occasionally take place, the board should consider replacing the head only after an extensive process of evaluation has been considered. The board should be more oriented toward hiring and supporting than hiring and firing. Every head of school understands his or her reporting relationship with the board. But if the head believes the board is supportive and working together for the best interests of the school, then he or she can lead confidently.

In addition to these fundamental responsibilities, there are specific responsibilities that have to do with familiarity of school programs and marketing initiatives as well as awareness and advocacy for those programs. Board members should embrace their ambassador roles, and the board chair should be the primary cheerleader for ensuring this occurs. Each board member has a sphere of influence and should use that influence to build awareness in the community among those who might not be acquainted with the school or certain specific aspects of the school. It is significantly important that the chair articulate the magnitude of this responsibility and provide precise examples of how this works. The head of school can support this initiative as well. The head can provide information and material, and accompany the board chair to foster these connections and build greater appreciation for the school.

When thinking about what determines the board's health, several factors must be considered. At the top of such a list of factors would have to be the board selection process. Is there a committee on trustees (or a governance committee), and is that

committee charged with recruitment, orientation, education, and evaluation of board members? This is a thorough process that stipulates the school will make every effort to secure the services and support of trustees who truly understand and embrace their roles and responsibilities. The result is a stronger, healthier board and a stronger, healthier school.

In an effort to ensure that the board is as strong as possible, the recruitment process must include a discussion of expectations. Are you expected to attend meetings? Are you expected to serve on a committee? Are you expected to give as generously as you are able? Are you expected to recognize the difference between your role and the head's? Such issues must be addressed to bring additional clarity to the role of a board member. All Christian schools want engaged and contributing board members. By illuminating expectations, board members are better prepared to serve with distinction.

What should naturally follow an excellent recruitment process and communicating expectations is a belief that board education and board culture make a difference. Does the board want to be a best practices board that includes a method for some type of board education? Does the board conduct an annual or at least a periodic retreat? Does the board retain individuals who have expertise and experience in working with Christian or independent school governing boards? These are the questions and these are the issues that will result in a level of health that truly impacts the school in meaningful and productive ways.

Christian schools face a range of challenges to achieving their mission. However, the work done at these schools in preparing students for a future that our culture desperately needs simply means that the stakes are enormous. And the ultimate responsibility for getting it right falls to the governing board. It is imperative that boards recognize the certain correlation between being a healthy board, adhering to best practices, and acknowledging that they can and should have a positive impact on school growth. This will have enormous positive consequences on the school's future.

Learning from the experience of Providence Christian Academy is a valuable lesson in accepting the principle that healthy boards and healthy schools aren't merely phrases, but rather an expression and recognition of the reality that Christian schools can best achieve their mission when there is a connection between the two.

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