

Value-Driven Board Leadership

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Jay Ferguson

School board members play many important roles: fundraiser, spokesperson, financial overseer, and fiduciary. None of these roles is more important, however, than that of keeper of the school’s mission, vision, and values. As Peter Greer noted, Christian organizations tend to drift from their founding mission (2014). A strong, intentional, value-driven school board is one of the most significant bulwarks against mission drift; it ensures missional integrity and helps maintain an educational ministry worthy of stakeholder support.

Values are the foundational artifacts—the building blocks—of a school culture (Kouzes and Pozner 2007). Values characterize what a community represents: the ideals that give it purpose and meaning and that help the community identify what things are worthy of commitment. Values focus attention and define success (Deal and Peterson 2009). Identifying and living out shared values gives school family members a common language. When schools clarify their values, and when school family members’ values are aligned with the school’s values, it unleashes tremendous power: people care what they are doing and are more effective and satisfied in their work, allowing the school constituency to operate with stronger unity and trust. In a Christian school, those values are articulated in the context of the gospel and the school community. These agreed-upon values, which Sergiovanni calls “community covenants,” infuse the schoolhouse with life (1996).

Our school has a shorthand way to state its purpose: *Grace Community School exists to “teach Jesus.”* It accomplishes its purpose through three articulated values. The first value is *educational sanctification*, covering two ideas: first, holiness—the idea that God’s Word and truth are the foundation of everything we do at our school, from our policies and procedures to our pedagogy, curriculum, and programming—and second, the idea of progressive growth: the continuous process of becoming better than we once were. Our second value is *redemptive community*: community with the purpose of loving each other completely, as God commands, in a way that honors and glorifies Him and creates a safe environment for learning and spiritual formation. Our third value is *life as worship*, taken from Romans 12:1: everything we do—whether it’s on the field, in the classroom, in the office, or in the boardroom—is an act of giving God our first fruits and declaring Him worthy of praise.

One note before we continue: if you say, “Those sound good, I’ll just use those,” you have completely missed the point. You and your board have to imagine and articulate what living

out the gospel looks like in your school and how it plays out in your community, and define those values in a meaningful way that resonates specifically within your school family.

A value-driven board works with its head of school to envision, define, articulate, and protect these community values. Once these have been formulated and defined, board members should be (1) selected based upon their agreement with the school community’s values, (2) trained in what the values mean and how they are applied in the daily life of the school, and (3) engaged in regular board level discussions as to how the school’s values guide and direct their decisions.

First, board members should be selected based upon their preexisting commitment to the school’s core values. There is an inside joke on my board: anyone who asks, “How do I get on that board, anyway?” is probably disqualified. Aspiring to leadership is not a bad thing, but often the heart behind the question is the desire to gain power and “solve” a single, burning issue—a far cry from the servant leadership valued by most Christian schools. More appropriately, the board will see leaders emerge either within the school community or in their larger community, quietly serving and living out those values important to the school family before they officially gain the position. America’s founders’ admonition that the “office should seek the person, not the person the office” is apropos here.

In addition to whatever values are unique to the school, the guidance for elders of 1 Timothy 3 can apply to Christian schools: school board members should be above reproach, sober minded, self-controlled, not quarrelsome, and respected in the community. These are the qualities of a strong board member. Boards made up of such people can prioritize the school’s values and the gospel (rather than popularity, politics, or some other motivation) when selecting board members. Such a board can identify, select, and educate its own with an eye towards these critical elements.

Second, not only should board members be selected with an eye toward the mission and values of the school community; they should be consistently trained and equipped with respect to those values as well. The school’s values should be introduced and discussed at new board member orientation. New board members should understand the history of the school, and should hear the stories of how the school

struggled through good times and bad to attain and maintain its values. The values should be regularly reviewed at board meetings, and how they are defined and implemented within the school should be discussed as a part of the board's overall commitment to ongoing professional development.

Third, in committee and staff reports, special focus should be given to how the school's values are being carried out through the school's various initiatives, and board members should be encouraged to inquire how those values are manifested in school operations. Our school board often begins its annual strategic planning sessions by revisiting the mission and values of the school. This exercise helps our board focus and recommit to what is most important to us before we discuss the school's future. The categories delineating our strategic plan are tied into our school's values (educational sanctification, redemptive community, and life as worship). Our annual board agenda is then built around that plan. In so doing, our board ensures that every board meeting will be intentionally mission- and value-driven.

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One of the most significant decisions a board can make with respect to its community values is hiring a new head of school. One of the reasons for the much-heralded turnover among heads of school is, at its core, a lack of value congruence between head and board. For example, the head may have a good reputation as an educator, a fund-raiser, or a financial turnaround expert—but the board does not have a clear consensus as to the head's values and “hills to die on.” Therefore, the board is unclear on what or whom is really needed. If the head's values do not match those of the board, one of two things happens: the head leaves (or is fired) when the value mismatch becomes evident, or the head leads the organization toward his or her own values, which may be far afield of the school's founding purposes. This is a recipe for mission drift. A strong, value-driven board, one that continually asks itself the hard questions as to what the school stands for, inoculates against mission drift. A thoughtful and intentional board asks these same hard questions of its board candidates up front to ferret out shared values.

It is not enough simply to envision, articulate, and make decisions through the lens of the values, however. Value-driven boards should model them in the school community. In so doing, each board member engages in *incarnational leadership*. As Christ lived out the kingdom of heaven in caring, loving, and sacrificing for His disciples, so board members, as well as the head, are called by God to live out

what is important to the community. Incarnational leadership emanates from a heart submitted to Christ and motivated by love; it manifests in the Holy Spirit's evident presence, power, and work in the leader's life; it is characterized by sacrifice, suffering, and service for God and His people.

If family enrichment and support is a value of your school, are your board members willing to give their time to meet with a family having marriage or work struggles? Are they peacemakers, seeking to resolve conflict by facilitating and encouraging crucial conversations between disgruntled parents and school staff members, rather than simply enabling those continued grievances by being a “listening ear” in the parking lot? Are board members using their positions to gain an advantage for their own children, or are they willing to sacrifice their interests for the community and mission of the school?

A school board member's incarnational leadership can perhaps be best seen in times of conflict involving that member's own children in the school. A Christian school is a kingdom enterprise, subject to profound spiritual attack. These assaults frequently come upon leadership, and board members who happen to be school parents will often be tested when their children endure conflict with a teacher or a disciplinary issue with the school. How board members handle that conflict—either supporting the teacher and the school or using their position to manipulate the outcome—speaks volumes. Members who weather such a test will underscore school integrity, build trust for leaders, and reinforce the values of your school for parents and students alike.

Reinhold Niebuhr said, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing that is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone” (1952). We need value-driven board members acting as ambassadors and evangelists, speaking life and truth into our people, keeping our mission true.

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