

TEACHERS LOOK AT THEIR SCHOOL BOARDS

Boards provide guidance and control to most group ventures in the world today. All professions have one or more boards that monitor the quality of their performance. Historically, American K-12 schools and teachers have been managed by school boards whose membership represents their community's "lay people." This local control has generally worked well.

Since the very beginning of the United States, its citizens have felt that the genius of American education is that local community school boards provide guidance, as contrasted with centralized control by more distant bodies like national accrediting agencies or the federal government. The rationale has been that "local boards know the needs of the community, and they can be held accountable."

This noteworthy strength of local responsibility can at times also become its weakness. When we survey the history of locally controlled education, we find horrifying tales of micromanagement and intrusion into the private lives of teachers. The early history of Christian schools contains stories of rules and board conduct that were intrusive and inappropriate. Two areas are most notable: (1) school board directives that defined who and when

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teachers could date (this was especially true when nearly all teachers were female); and (2) school boards' failure to pay their teachers in a timely manner.

All that has changed as the church school system of education has developed and become more systematized, which has included the crafting of procedures and policies that create specified limits and required accountability for board members. We now know that strong schools with strong school boards, properly guided by appropriate guidelines, ensure successful education.

Today, K-12 boards generally receive high marks from the teaching staffs they serve. This article examines what educators, especially teachers, think about how their boards function. Information and ideas for this article were shared by a random group of teachers, principals, superintendents, board members, and one

conference president who responded to an open-ended survey about school board impact on church school educators' professional lives. Interestingly, the concerns and suggestions cited by survey respondents were quite similar.

Ninety-five percent of the respondents said they "fully agree" or "agree with reservation" that their school board is supportive of their school's faculty and their work. By

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contrast, 78 percent of the respondents said they “fully agree” that their board is supportive of them personally and of their work.

Identified Problems

While the respondents said their boards supported them, they also offered suggestions that they believed would enhance the board’s performance. Because the survey was open-ended, we did not offer possible problem areas for the respondents to check. The suggestions that follow came directly from the teachers’ experiences.

The following four problems surfaced as the most frequently listed concerns of the educators/teachers:

- a. Poor communication skills that affect interaction between board members and education employees;
- b. Inaccurate understanding of their board-member role;
- c. Poor selection processes; and
- d. Lack of in-service education for board members.

Poor Communication Skills

Teachers and principals are greatly

concerned about the poor interpersonal communication skills demonstrated by many board members. They are especially alarmed that board members often listen to parents and students, then discuss their complaints during board meetings without first talking with the teachers to verify the accuracy of the reports. Teachers also believe board members should visit their schools to learn firsthand what is going on.

The teachers suggested that board members and parents follow the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 when dealing with them. Here is an adaptation of the Scripture that clarifies teacher concerns:

“If you believe one of your teachers performs unprofessionally, go to that teacher and share the concerns you have about his or her conduct. Be sure to do this in private. Keep it between just the two of you. If the teacher listens and corrects the problem, you have saved a valuable minister of children. But, if the teacher refuses to listen, talk with him or her again, but this time invite the superintendent of schools to go with you, for the Bible teaches that every com-

plaint must be proved true by two or more witnesses. If the teacher refuses to listen, report the matter to the school’s personnel committee for discussion. Be sure the superintendent is present when you do this” (adapted by Clarence Dumbabin from Matthew 18:15-17).

Closely related to this concern is the belief held by many teachers that board members do not try to know them or see them as individuals. Several respondents wrote: “We want board members to take the time to talk with us and get to know us as people who love their children. We also want them to visit our classrooms and see how our school works.”

Teachers find it difficult to understand how board members can be effective in their work if they do not visit to see what educators and students are doing. They also want them to visit the classrooms and playgrounds to make sure they are in good repair and safe for children. This experience will give them some insights into the kinds of problems teachers handle on a daily basis.

From the teachers’ perspective, schools are bound to have a serious

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communication gap when educators are excluded from communication and decision-making. They understand that there must be a school board to assume the legal and ethical responsibilities of the school's operation; however, they do not understand why their ideas and per-

spectives are not given a place in the decision-making process.

Misunderstanding the School Board Member's Role

Many of the responding educators strongly believed that board members do not understand what a board is supposed to do. They felt that school boards should receive regular in-service orientation to help them understand the limits of their roles and to identify responsibilities that are often overlooked. The educators also suggested that board members should become better acquainted with the union and conference education codes so their agendas and local policies will comply with the guidelines given to them for operating schools.

One of the biggest concerns expressed by the educators responding to the survey was board members' belief that their role includes micromanaging the school's daily program. One respondent wrote: "The board chair took it upon himself to have the board vote that the teacher must keep the desks lined up in neat rows. Classroom organization is clearly a teacher responsibility."

A related concern is board members

who come into the classrooms intent on supervising the program. Generally accepted guidelines for boards state that members hold authority collectively during board meetings, but this does not extend to individual members having power over the day-by-day activities of faculty and administration.

The Selection Process

Educators who responded to the survey expressed concern about the process for identifying and selecting potential board members. While it is true that smaller congregations have a finite number of candidates for boards and committees, teachers believe the process for selection could be improved. For example, nominating committees could use the job descriptions provided in the union education code book and in the board member's manual as the basis for identifying possible candidates. They also could use a short outline format to ask for a brief summary of the candidate's talents and interests that would qualify him or her to serve as a board member.

Teachers suggested that nominating committees avoid asking more than one family member to serve on the school board. They give two reasons for this: If the two members are husband and wife, one or the other typically stays home to take care of the children, thus denying the board the benefit of the absent parent's ideas. The second concern is that family members could create a block voting problem that could damage the functioning of the board.

There is also a sense among observers that some people aspire to become board members to push their own agendas. The Board Member Code of Ethics developed by the Columbia Union Conference declares that board membership should be used to enhance ministry to the children of the community and not to provide a platform for a personal agenda.

While the respondents to the survey did not use the term "servant-leadership," their descriptions of appropriate board decision-making indicate that school board members should see themselves as serving the students, the school, and the church. Servant-leader-

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ship contrasts greatly with leadership that seeks to push one's own agenda.

Robert K. Greenleaf writes: "The most important qualification for trustees [board members] should be that they care for the institution, which means that they care for all of the people the institution touches, and that they are determined to make their caring count."* When educators see board members giving this type of leadership, they are reassured and give a sigh of collective relief.

In-service Opportunities for Board Members

Responding teachers repeatedly mentioned the need for conference offices of education and the board itself to provide in-service activities for members. They urged that superintendents of schools meet with the board more frequently than they currently do.

Kent Cabreira, an educator and graphic artist, included with his response a list of journals specifically published to help school board members enlarge their knowledge of excellent boardsmanship. (See the box on page 14.) Boards may wish to order one or more subscriptions to allow members to become acquainted with current information about board leadership.

Characteristics Educators Want to See in Board Members

Integrity was the number one characteristic. One teacher said: "Elect people to our board who will stand behind their word at all times." Another was emphatic in his observation: "Board members should stand by the promises they make when interviewing us and not change their minds after we sign our contracts."

"Board members should really care about the school," said another teacher. An important part of that caring atti-

tude is supporting their teachers and principal. One teacher told of an encounter with her board: "I had a student who was a behavior problem for several years. Each time I took the matter to the board, all they did was to ask me to keep trying to work with him."

The teacher added this word of advice: "When a teacher takes a behavior problem to the board, the board members should recognize that she has already done all she knows how to do." She suggested that the board chair and members who visit the school become personally acquainted with what is happening so they will be better able to show caring concern for both students and teachers.

Responding teachers said they wished for more support from their boards. Publicly supporting a teacher or

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principal does not mean that the board chair should not meet in private to discuss problems with him or her. At the heart of Matthew 18 is the principle that all of us will sometime behave in an inappropriate manner. When that occurs, while being publicly supportive, the board may find it prudent to hold

the person accountable privately.

Teachers responding to the survey also asked that board members be interested enough in their school to serve as recruiters within the congregation. Failure to enthusiastically recruit students frequently denotes a board member's lack of interest in the school generally

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and his or declining support for the its program.

Understand School Board Processes

Teachers and principals understand well the need for boards to follow due process in order to protect both them and their students. Unfortunately, many have experienced situations where school boards met and took actions without having a quorum or without the superintendent present. Other boards have failed to follow the steps of due process outlined in the union and conference education codes. Decisions have been made without prior discussion with teachers and without the conference superintendent present.

Personnel management problems sometimes create impossible situations. One such problem was identified by a conference president who described a board meeting when he was an intern. "As a young pastor sitting on a local school board, I was unsure how to respond when the chair asked: 'Do we wish to continue Mr. M_____ at the school for another year?'"

"This question is usually asked innocently with the assumption that the response will be a resounding 'Yes!' But it invites perceptions, rumors, or angry reactions that are sometimes helpful—

but too frequently hurtful," the president wrote.

He clarified his concern as follows: "School boards should confront their role and responsibility regarding the performance of teachers. The teachers are not their employees. They work for the school system and are evaluated by the conference office of education."

Conclusion

Of all the boards and committees formed by the church, the school board is the single body that most directly affects the professional life of any church employee. Educators and board members alike seek fulfillment of a single goal—"Introducing students to Jesus Christ as Friend and Saviour." It is tragic when poor communication or a misunderstanding of roles creates a short circuit in the process.

The strong foundation of trust that a large majority of educators have in

their boards combined with appropriate in-service and orientation activities—and keeping in mind the definition of their jobs—should produce boards whose talents, aptitude, and desire to be servant-leaders will benefit students, teachers, and the church at large. Indeed, effective boards are an invaluable part of effective schools. ☞

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* Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 55. (Italics in original.)

RESOURCES

The following sources will provide school board members with information about their roles. Kent Cabreira, a graphic artist/Web designer and educator who lives in La Selva Beach, California, provided these recommendations when he responded to the survey.

Journal

The American School Board Journal was founded in 1891. The subscription price is \$54 for 12 monthly issues. You'll receive four bound-in issues of *Electronic School*, the quarterly technology magazine for K-12 school leaders. For information, write to: *The American School Board Journal*, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet address: <http://www.asbj.com>.

School Board Association

Write to: National School Boards Association (NSBA), 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Phone: (703) 838-6722; Fax: (703) 683-7590. Internet address: <http://www.nsba.org>.

Book

Gerald Bailey, Dan Lumley, and Deborah Dunbar, *Leadership and Technology: What School Board Members Need to Know* (1995). ISBN 0-88364-196-8. Available from the National School Boards Association. This is a special report done by the NSBA's Institute for the Transfer of Technology to Education (ITTE). Internet address for ITTE: <http://www.nsba.org/itte/>.

Adventist Resources

Check with your conference office of education to learn if it has a school board manual. Most do have one.