

# On Board

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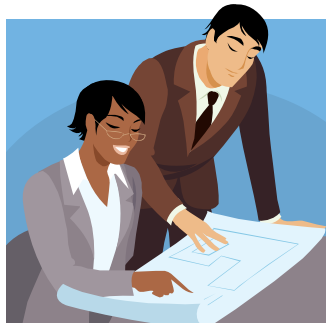
## The Lutheran School—Agent for Change?

*Have you ever been frustrated by how difficult it is to implement new ideas at your school? Have you ever developed a careful plan of action only to have it summarily rejected by others? Have you ever concluded that your congregation's decision-making processes are specifically designed to discourage school improvement? All of these situations are impacted by the ability of governing systems to recognize and respond to change. This issue of ON BOARD explores the important role the school board can play as a change agent in the school and congregation community.*

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It has been said that every system is perfectly designed for the results it gets. This makes sense! The unique combination of people, processes, structures, and resources in any organization results in outcomes, both positive and negative, reflective of the particular ingredients of the organization.

An important corollary to this assumption about systems is this: if different results are desired, change the systems. This makes sense, too!



Some wise person once put it slightly differently, and less kindly when he commented, "insanity is doing something the same way over and over again and expecting different results."

Lutheran congregations and schools are not immune to the realities of these observations. Environments, needs, circumstances, and goals all change. New people sit in the pews, or at least

they are awaiting an invitation. Students from a variety of backgrounds are in the school classrooms. People's values and the ways they express their support for ministry change. As a result, operating policies and governing structures that served so well in the past suddenly aren't as helpful.

One of the important tasks of a Lutheran school board is to help assure effective school operation, even in the midst of change, so that the school can achieve its mission. Since people tend naturally to resist change (have you heard the one about how many Lutherans it takes to change a light bulb?!), it is tempting to keep doing things the way they have been done and to ignore the fact that the results are no longer successful. Since the school is often the most likely congregation ministry program to be confronted with change, school leaders have a critical responsibility. The school board needs to help people in the congregation and school community recognize the changes around them and serve as a catalyst for adapting systems to successfully address these changes.

## St. Paul Lutheran School – A Case Study

Some changes seem to take place overnight. Other changes tend to “sneak up” on us. Often times, church leaders first become aware of the changes around them because of the tension these changes can cause within the life of the congregation. Consider the case of St. Paul Lutheran Church and School:

St. Paul is a school of 200 students located in a medium-sized town in the Midwest. While at one time focused on agriculture, today the town is increasingly populated by people who make a long commute to jobs in a much larger city about fifty miles away. The school is a ministry arm of St. Paul Lutheran Church, a congregation with an



average worship attendance of 500. St. Paul congregation recently celebrated its 100th anniversary. St. Paul school has been in existence for nearly 80 years.

The congregation and school operate

through a governing structure very common to Lutheran schools. A voter’s assembly, open to all members of the congregation, meets four times each year. The voters elect a church council to govern congregation’s activities. A school board provides oversight for the operation of the school. Its’ members are also elected by the congregation. As per the congregation’s by-laws, the school board chairperson serves as a member of the church council.

The pastoral staff at St. Paul includes a senior pastor and an assistant pastor. The senior pastor is considered the chief administrative staff person and works closely with the church council. The calling of pastors and the calling or hiring of the school principal and full-time faculty is done through action of the voter’s assembly.

The congregation and school utilize a unified budget, which is approved each spring by the congregation. The school board has authority for establishing tuition rates. It recommends to the congregation additions to the teaching staff.

Salary and benefit issues, however, are the responsibility of a personnel committee appointed by the church council.

## Current Challenges

St. Paul school is known in the community as a place that provides a caring, high quality, Christ-centered education experience. It is also recognized for the very modest tuition it charges in comparison to other local private and parochial schools, especially to church members. However, even with its positive reputation, in recent years there have been signs of enrollment slippage. This seems to be due to two primary factors: significant improvements in the community’s perceptions of its public elementary and middle schools and the gradual aging of residents of the community, which is resulting in fewer young children.

Two very fine teachers from St. Paul left the school last year to take much higher paying positions in the public school system. The school principal is a former classroom teacher at St. Paul who reluctantly agreed to accept her post two years ago after several individuals declined calls to serve the congregation.

School finances are an increasingly difficult issue. A significant portion of the school income comes from the general operating budget of the congregation. The congregation’s membership has declined slightly during each of the last five years and general giving has remained flat. It is evident that additional staff is needed in order for the congregation to address the nurture and outreach opportunities that exist. The church and school facilities are also in need of major investment in repair and maintenance. These factors have made it difficult for the congregation to maintain its traditional level of support for its school ministry.

Efforts to increase tuition have been consistently resisted by a small, but influential, number of individuals in the congregation. These people believe that it is wrong for the congregation to charge tuition to members and they are very concerned that the “average” family won’t be able to afford the school.

Tensions are increasing among the various leadership groups. A significant minority of the church council feels that the percentage of the congregation's budget in support of the school ministry is too high, especially since the percentage of students who are members of the congregation is declining. Several school board members maintain that the school is the most active and effective ministry in the congregation. They believe that the congregation is not supportive enough of the school's ministry. Adding to these dynamics is the perceived ambivalence of the senior pastor, who generally seems supportive of the school, but who avoids taking a strong stand in church council meetings and who is rarely visible during the school day or in school activities.

## School Board Concerns

The St. Paul school board has engaged in several lengthy discussions in the past year regarding their frustrations and concerns. Several specific topics have surfaced. School board members perceive a growing disagreement about the purpose of the school. They sense that many people see the school as a service to children of congregation members. They note, however, that less than 40% of eligible member children attend the school and that enrollment growth in recent years has come from un-churched families and those who have church homes other than St. Paul.

School board members are also convinced that the congregation's ability to attract, retain, and care for quality teachers and administrators is threatened by its inability to provide competitive salary and benefits. Financial constraints in the congregation's budget are also making it difficult to maintain and improve the school facility.

School board members are often confused regarding their governing authority. The congregation's by-laws state that the school board will oversee the operation of the school. However, there have been several recent occasions when the school board has been challenged by the church council and the voters for taking actions that exceed its authority.

Making decisions regarding school operation

takes a long time at St. Paul. The process of calling or hiring a teacher can take several months before approval is obtained from the congregation. Even important school maintenance items can take weeks to resolve due to the fact that repairs require the approval of the congregation facilities committee.

Last, but not least, the school board is convinced that the evolution of the town from a small, rural community to a suburban bedroom community has brought new pressures to the school. The "new" population increasingly expects high degree of excellence in facility and program. While the congregation has always stressed the caring, Christian environment of the school, the board fears that the school will lose enrollment unless new and special programs and facilities are added.

## Change Leadership

Recognizing the need for change, implementing changes and adapting to them is difficult. The classic story of the frog in the kettle exemplifies how easy it is to fail to recognize changes in the environment until it's too late. In addition to the time and energy required for the school board to engage itself in the process of change, the board also faces the challenge of helping others recognize the need for change. Since the school board often is not the final authority for determining the direction and policies that govern Lutheran school operation, this challenge is usually even more difficult. Yet, it is important to remember that without the leadership of the school board, congregation leaders or other constituent group in the school may fail to recognize the need for change.



Leading change involves three basic stages: 'unfreezing' current behavior patterns, implementing new ways of doing things, and 'refreezing,' or institutionalizing the new approaches. John Kotter, at the Harvard

University School of Business, suggests an eight-stage process for implementing change:

1. Establish a sense of urgency.
2. Create a guiding coalition.
3. Develop a vision and strategy.
4. Communicate the changing vision.
5. Empower a broad base of people to take action.
6. Generate short-term wins.
7. Consolidate gains and produce additional “wins”.
8. Institutionalize new approaches in the culture.

Given its current charter, St. Paul’s school board does not have the authority to pursue these steps independently. It can, however, provide much leadership in certain areas, especially in the crucial early stages of creating a case for change and helping cast a vision for the effective future that can exist if needed changes are made.

As the school board considers how it can best bring about needed change, it will do well to remember two other important points. First, care must be taken to honor the total ministry of the congregation. A school ministry is a vital, important ministry. However, it is not the only ministry program in a congregation. The goal of change efforts needs to be the improved effectiveness of the entire ministry of the congregation.

Second, while the school board is encouraging and leading other leaders toward needed change, it bears the responsibility to model a willingness to change in areas that fall within its own authority. Intentional processes to scan the environment, evaluate current practices, and encourage creative solutions will not only move the school to continual improvement, but will also bring value to the entire ministry of the congregation.

### *For Further Discussion*

Based on what you have read about the situation at St. Paul Lutheran Church and School, what changes would you suggest to address the various challenges they face?

### *For further study*

What external and internal challenges are calling out for change in the policies and practices of your school? Name one or two specific actions you can take as a school board to implement each of Kotter’s eight-step change process in order to address these challenges.

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