

On Board

Volume 16, Issue 3

February 2005

Is It Time To Put Your Board On A Diet?

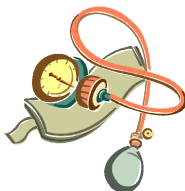
Are your board meetings showing signs of agenda obesity? Does your board suffer from mission anemia? Are you looking for a good exercise routine to keep your board sharp and fit to carry out its responsibilities? If so, put on those sweat pants and look into this issue of ON BOARD for some different twists on the theme of school board health!

It's sad, but true. The United States is the most obese country in the world. Lack of exercise, portion sizes that are too large, unhealthy dietary habits, and other factors are well known as causes for this epidemic of obesity.

Is it possible that organizations and boards struggle with their weight, too? This question is not aimed at the amount snacks and beverages consumed during board meetings! Rather, it has to do with the choices boards make in the process of carrying out their responsibility, including "food" consumed in the form of time, energy, and data, and the "exercises" in which they engage in order to stay effective.

Passing the physical

When a person goes to the doctor, a variety of symptoms are explored to give evidence to the state of health and wellness. Some of these are quite obvious, such as obesity. Others may not be as evident, such as hyper-tension. The same is true for organizations and their boards. What symptoms indicate that a school board is at high risk for major health problems? The signs can vary, but the indicators might include:



- Long meetings...Board meetings consistently last beyond the two hour mark. Many special meetings are needed and they also last well into the evening.
- Board member apathy...Board members come to meetings unprepared, arrive late, leave early, or don't bother to attend at all.
- Board member turnover...Board members resign in mid-term or do not want to be re-nominated for another term.
- Difficulty recruiting new board members... Those with responsibility for nominating new board members can't find enough candidates. Current board members are pressured to serve beyond the limits of their term because no one else will serve.
- Out-of-date board policies...The most recently adopted board policy was written more than five years ago. Board members don't have copies of the board policy manual, either because one doesn't exist or it is never used.
- High levels of personal conflict among board members...Serious conflicts exist among various members of the board that extend beyond legitimate disagreement about board issues.
- Blaming others for the board's problems... Board members channel frustration by blaming lack of board effectiveness on lack

of cooperation or support from other people or circumstances, especially leaders of the sponsoring congregation.

- Ineffective pastor/principal team...The board is caught in the middle of a poor relationship between the school principal and the pastor of the sponsoring congregation.
- Lack of clarity about the school's mission... Board members lack a common understanding of the school and the sponsoring congregation.
- Absence of strategic thinking or planning... When board members are asked to briefly state the mission of the school or the board's vision for the school's future, the question is followed by an uncomfortable silence. There is little or no evidence of a planning process.
- Board micro-management...Board agendas and minutes indicate consistent evidence of extended discussion related to day-to-day administrative decisions.

Prevention is the best cure!

Most adults realize that curing a health problem is costly, time consuming, risky, and difficult. Far more effective in the long-term is focusing on behaviors, attitudes, and habits that prevent or decrease the risk of disease and illness.

The same thing holds true for school boards. It is more difficult to resolve conflicts that have gotten out of hand, to re-structure an ineffective governing process, or to change a culture of apathy or distrust than it is to invest in activities that will help prevent these un-healthy conditions.

As is also true with individual health, a large part of the challenge is being willing to change. Many boards are so busy doing things that aren't effective, that they find it impossible to invest in behaviors and habits that would ultimately help them. Unfortunately, it is also true that some board members are actually more comfortable with an unhealthy situation because they fear that change will diminish their power or influence. In any case, the 'timeless truth' that every system is perfectly designed for the results it gets' is certainly true of school board health.

With all this in mind, the following healthy

advice will look familiar, especially to anyone who was raised by parents who promoted the value of broccoli and spinach! It will also have value for those hoping to avoid a trip to the board doctor!

Eat right

A balanced diet for school boards includes several nutritious ingredients, such as...

- A board charter...Healthy boards possess a clear understanding of their purpose. They also know who has entrusted them with authority and the extent of this authority. While this information should be contained in the school's by-laws, a short charter statement included as part of the board's policy manual can help prevent the unwanted disease symptoms of confusion and frustration.
- Written board policies...A healthy voice is important. Boards speak through policies. Keeping a board's vocal chords in good shape requires that attention be given to specific policies that communicate the board's values and perspectives.
- Strong relationships...Organizational management experts know that the most productive work groups are those that invest time on both task and team. Building a healthy board team means taking time to help board members get to know one another better and to gain trust in one another.
- A faith-filled perspective...Board work can be difficult. It requires a hearty faith that comes from the knowledge of who and whose we are. Worship, Bible study, and prayer are staples of this diet!
- Competence...A healthy board must include members with skills necessary to accomplish the board's purpose. Building competent board members requires doses of 'vitamins and nutrients' such as intentional recruitment procedures and regular board training.



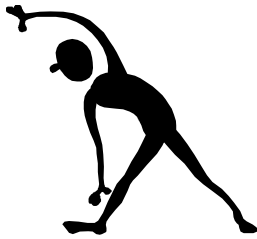
Maintaining this balanced diet also requires self-discipline in order to avoid the fattening foods that boards like so much! A school's day-to-day operating issues are one such 'food.' Another is unnecessary data and information that result from

a lack of clarity about desired goals, outcomes, and measurement. These are sugary and sweet delights to many board members! Fun to dig into with a spoon or fork! But, these tempting treats are also guaranteed to fill a board's time and energy to the extent that it will not have room for the fruits and vegetables practices and procedures needed for it to stay healthy.

Exercise

Another key element in maintaining health is regular exercise that burns calories and helps keep us trim and fit. It may be fun to envision school board members doing jumping jacks around the board table. However, the exercise that keeps a board healthy includes the following activities:

- Team building activities...Five or ten minutes designated at the start of each board meeting can go a long way toward building a healthy board team and board/principal team. Resources such as Wheat Ridge Ministries' *Healthy Teams Project* (www.wheatridge.org) can provide ideas and recommended sources for activities to help build trust, understanding, and collegiality among board members.
- Reading assignments...Board work is brain work. A great way to exercise board member's brains is to commit to reading books and articles related to the governance process. Again, a few minutes regularly invested in this way during a board meeting can go a long way toward strengthening a board.
- Training sessions...Bringing consultants or trainers into the board room can 'pump up' board competence. Great topics for such sessions include understanding financial statements, appropriate meeting procedures, board member ethics, and trends in education.
- Board recruitment...Finding board members who are fit for service makes boardsmanship much easier. Doing so, though, requires its own exercise regimen. It involves an intentional and disciplined approach to



determining and communicating desired skills and experience, identifying qualified candidates, and providing appropriate information and orientation.

Get plenty of rest

A very important ingredient in personal wellness is adequate rest. Bodies, minds, and spirits need time to relax, recover, and renew in order to stay healthy. The Bible provides much encouragement about setting aside time for rest.

Rest is important for school boards, too. Rest includes not only a break from board responsibilities, but also taking time to engage in alternative activities that help provide perspective, time for reflection and creativity, and bonding among board members. Rest enhancing activities for school boards include:

- Board retreats...There is, perhaps, no better way to build relationships, grow together as a faith community, and address important topics and issues than the retreat process. Retreats work best when they take place away from the church and school facility. Use of an outside resource person serving as a facilitator or presenter can be especially effective.
- Social activities...Taking time for an occasional special celebration or social event is a great way to build relationships and provide rest and relaxation from the rigors of the board's work. It is true that boards that pray together and play together, stay together!
- Meeting management...Meetings that go on for hours and hours are generally not productive, nor are they healthy for participants. Long meetings often result from lack of clarity about the board's purpose and role. Establishing ground rules for meeting length and holding each other accountable is one way board members can help avoid burnout and frustration.
- Administrative empowerment...Boards that empower their principal or director by providing freedom to make administrative decisions within established boundaries find more time to concentrate on governance issues and less need for lengthy meetings.

For further discussion

What major concerns do you have about your board's health? What symptoms are driving your concerns? What ideas or concepts from this issue of ON BOARD would you like to pursue further? What health assets - things your board does well and resources that is has available - does your board possess? How can these be used to improve the state of your board's health?

For further study

A fun and interesting new book that can help boards who are trying to maintain healthy habits is titled *Roberta's Rules of Order*, written by Alice Collier Cochran (Jossey-Bass). The author provides helpful insights into the origins and original intentions of the famous *Robert's Rules of Order*. More importantly, the book provides great suggestions for modification of traditional meeting procedures to help today's leaders develop productive meetings.

P.S.

Is your school actively engaged in an accreditation process? The school accreditation and certification processes available to schools through the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association, as well as those offered by regional accrediting agencies and organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) are wonderful resources for building and sustaining effective schools. Contact your district, synod, or church-wide office for further information and assistance!



ON BOARD is a quarterly publication for Lutheran school boards

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