The Many Hats of the Lutheran School Board Member...Which Ones Do You Wear?

Do you remember how much fun it was to play with hats as a child? Putting on a particular hat seemed to transform you into a new person. If you wore a cowboy hat, you became a tough trail rider. Wearing a nurse’s cap, you found yourself helping people in a hospital. Your toy fireman’s hat helped you put out many blazes. When you placed your dad’s cap or your mom’s Easter bonnet on your head, you suddenly felt ready for adult responsibilities.

Adults get to wear many hats, too! We are asked to place ourselves in many roles during our life – husband, wife, father, mother, employee, employer and volunteer, just to name just a few. When we are aware of our different roles in life we are able to better understand appropriate behavior in various situations. While we are, at our core, only one person, our actions and thought processes vary depending on what “hat” we are wearing at the time.

The many hats worn by board members

Those called to service on Lutheran school boards wear many hats each day. Some of these relate to their involvement with the school. The ability to identify these various school-related “hats” is essential to effective board service. Armed with this knowledge, board members can be more aware of the various interests that can impact the ability to govern.

Here are five hats commonly worn by Lutheran school board members:

- The parent (or grandparent) hat

Wearing the parent hat means being concerned first and foremost with a child’s welfare. Parents are responsible for the child’s education and safety and for establishing a loving and caring environment. To assist in these important duties, parents seek the help of a school, thus becoming
customers of the school. As customers, parents assess whether the value of the school’s assistance is worth the cost. Over time, parents may develop enough loyalty to the school to overcome instances when the perceived value is lacking. However, the parent hat requires that the relationship with the school ultimately be determined by satisfaction with the services delivered. If appropriate value is not perceived, parents will seek the services of another school.

- The goods and service provider hat

People who wear this hat have an economic stake in the success of the school. Without a successful school, vendors and others who provide goods or services lose a customer. Hat wearers include representatives of businesses providing products ranging from milk to graduation caps and gowns. They also include a variety of other people who provide services such as music lessons to students after school to referees who officiate athletic contests.

- The neighbor hat

Every Lutheran school exists in the midst of a larger neighborhood or community. Wise school leaders are very aware of the needs of those who wear the neighbor hat. They realize that the school’s neighbors, too, have vested interests in the activities of the school. The school’s neighbors are concerned about the school’s effect upon property values, safety, and traffic flow. Those wearing the neighbor’s hat value the school based on the degree to which the school is an asset to the neighborhood.

- The church member hat

Church members might have any number of interests related to the school. Some see the school as a means to accomplishing the mission of the congregation, i.e. building membership, bringing new people into the life of the congregation, or evangelizing people who are not yet Christians. Others church members value the school primarily because it is a source of income for the congregation. Still others see the school as a program that drains resources from the congregation’s budget. In any case, wearing the church member hat means valuing the school based on what it provides for the ministry of the congregation.

- The special interests hat

People who wear the special interests hat have a stake in the success of some aspect of the school. Special interest hat wearers include representatives of school-related organizations, such as the parent-teacher league or the athletic boosters. Often, faculty and staff members wear this hat as well. People with special interests want the board and administration to make decisions that best support their personal interests and causes.

Which hats belong in the boardroom?

The short answer to this question is “none of them!” The roles represented by these various hats are all valid. Lutheran school board members usually possess several of these hats and wear them at various times. However, all of these hats should be “checked at the door” during a board meeting.

The problem with these hats is that each requires primary attention and allegiance to something other than the good of the school. The parent’s chief interest is his child. The church member is interested in the welfare of the congregation. Those with special interests are concerned about their program or activity. Providers of goods or services want to have a market for their product or service. Neighbors of the school want to protect
their property and their neighborhood. These are all legitimate interests. However, they do not belong in the boardroom.

Wearing the board member hat

Wearing the board member hat is a challenge! It requires that all other hats be checked at the door. In order to serve the school community effectively, a board member’s focus must be on assuring the long-term success of the school’s mission. To do so requires the ability to see the big picture. It also requires the ability to make decisions for the good of the school ministry, choosing the welfare of all current and future students and the entire ministry over personal interests. Ideally, a Lutheran school board is composed of people who are representative of the diversity of the school community but who represent only the schools “owners,” not other special interests.

A person who effectively wears the board member hat is able to support a tuition increase, even though her family’s finances will be affected. Wearing this hat, a board member is able to support a budget that distributes resources in a way that best helps the school grow, even when his favorite school activity will receive less support. The person wearing the board member hat supports the board’s new athletic participation policy, even when the policy means her child may not make the basketball team.

To wear the board hat effectively, members need support. Board members need to be able to seek and receive support from each other during times when the presence of other hats make it difficult to govern. Lifting each other up in prayer is one way to provide such support. Regular discussion regarding the pressures of governance is also important. So, too, is finding ways to educate others about the responsibilities of the school board and the challenge of serving with integrity.

Hats off to school board members!

Not everyone possesses the gifts necessary for service as a Lutheran school board member. Exceptional wisdom and commitment is needed in order to set aside personal interests for the greater good of the school ministry. Experienced school board members can attest to how difficult it is to serve with integrity in the midst of many competing forces. Yet, by the grace of God, thousands of board members are doing just that. By doing so, they are helping ensure the vitality of Lutheran schools across the country.

Lutheran school board members are a great gift to Lutheran schools. Praise God for their ministry!

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For Further Discussion

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P.S.

The end of the school year means the end of terms of service for many Lutheran school board members. Does your board have a process in place for exit interviews with departing board members? Doing so is a great way to learn from these experienced people before they move away from board activity.

Most important, be sure to take time to thank these people publicly so that the entire school community can celebrate and praise God for the faithful service they have provided!