

# On Board

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## An Ounce of Prevention...Managing the Board's Work

*Are you overwhelmed by the responsibilities of board service? Do your hands sweat as you anticipate your next meeting? Do you dread the thought of another meeting that will last well into the night? Board service is never easy. However, there are things you can do to keep the process manageable. This issue of ON BOARD is designed to help you consider ways you can manage the governing process so that your board service remains enjoyable and satisfying.*



*Mary is excited about the year's first meeting of the Trinity Lutheran school board. She's looking forward to reacquainting herself with fellow board members*

*following the two month "summer break" the board granted itself. She's also anxious to meet the two new board members who were recently elected. And, of course, Mary can't wait to learn more about the plans the principal and faculty have for the new school year!*

*Mary's excitement is tempered by several concerns. Last year was her first year on the school board. She remembers some difficult board meetings, especially a couple that dealt primarily with concerns from parents. And, she remembers more than one meeting that lasted well into the night. What frustrated her most was the feeling that board members seemed to lack a unity of purpose and understanding of their role on the board. A couple of people even seemed to have a "hidden" agenda driving their actions. By the end of the school year she wondered if she was*

*really willing to commit to the time and stress of board service. There seemed to be so much to do! She's hoping that the new school year will provide a fresh start and that her experience this year will be more enjoyable.*

Sound familiar? Perhaps you can relate to some of Mary's reflections. As a board member, you want to do the right thing regarding welfare of the students, the quality of education, the care and nurture of teachers and fiscal accountability. However, your ability to address these issues is impacted by many factors, including your congregation's structures and procedures, your board's self-governance practices, parent and staff expectations and your training as board members.

### Paying Up and Paying Off

An old car repair commercial used the phrase "you can pay me now, or you can pay me later" to encourage customers to consider preventive vehicle maintenance. Preventive maintenance requires time, energy and financial resources. However, making this investment helps prevent major problems that have a greater cost.

The challenge faced by a school board is similar. A board must "pay up" by investing

time and energy in certain activities in order to be effective. Doing so may actually add work in the short term. However, the “pay off” for this investment is the difference made down the road



when major problems are prevented and areas of confusion are avoided, thus keeping the board’s work manageable, efficient and enjoyable.

Here are a few “preventative maintenance” suggestions that may help your board on its journey to effectiveness:

## Keep the main thing the main thing

Board governance guru John Carver defines a board’s role as ensuring that the organization achieves what it should and avoids what is unacceptable. While there’s a lot packed into this statement, it does focus attention to two basic board functions. One involves determining what the organization should achieve and monitoring progress toward these ends. The other involves establishing limits to the actions the staff can take as outcomes are pursued.

An accurate understanding of the board’s purpose is critical for managing the governance process. Boards whose members understand and accept its purpose are less likely to “major in minors.” A well-written and regularly reviewed purpose statement serves as a filter through which only certain issues and activities can flow. It is these items that are appropriate for board consideration.

## Know where the board fits

Don’t underestimate the impact of congregation dynamics on the work of the school board. Formal and informal power and authority, family systems dynamics, tradition, interpretations of Scripture and administrative structures are all part of the environment within which Lutheran congregations and schools operate. These

dynamics can make the life of some congregations very complex!

Time invested to better understand the board’s role within the larger structure of the congregation is time well spent. Knowing the extent and limits of its authority helps a board stay focused on appropriate matters. It also helps a board understand when it needs to serve as decision-maker, influencer, or advisor.

## Manage your meetings

Activities that appear efficient and easy are often the result of good planning. This is certainly true for school board meetings. Long, frustrating meetings are usually the result of poor planning.

All board members share responsibility for effective meetings. Effective boards develop written “board self-governance” policies defining expectations and protocols. Commonly understood and accepted operating procedures lend rhythm and consistency to meetings.

The board chair and the school principal provide important leadership to meeting preparations. Working together, these leaders help the board develop short and long-term agenda items and recommendations for board action. They also help ensure communication in advance of meetings so that all board members come to meetings prepared for the discussions and decisions they are asked to make.

## Take time to build relationships



To be effective, all work groups must have a clearly understood task. Often underestimated, however, is the impact of interpersonal relationships on accomplishing a task. Groups that understand their task and have

strong working relationships enjoy the most success.

It takes significant time and energy to build relationships among board members. However,

there is a huge payoff for doing so. Strong relationships help board members better understand the unique gifts each member brings to the board table and allow a board to resolve conflicts. Strong relationships make it more likely that group members trust and are honest with one another. By taking time to nurture relationships, the process of board discussion and decision-making can be a unifying experience, even when board members disagree.

## Empower your principal

A big temptation for many boards is to become overly involved in the daily administration of the school. Many school leaders define the board's job as establishing policy and the principal's job as administering policy. While this is an oversimplification, it serves as a good reminder that a board's primary responsibilities do not include day-to-day operational decisions. Boards that attempt to micro-manage inevitably find themselves overwhelmed and without time to focus on the "big picture."

An effective board invests time and resources in several activities that ultimately help keep its work manageable. First, it calls or hires a competent principal. Second, it develops clear policies that provide boundaries for the actions of the principal. Third, it allows the principal freedom to operate within these policy boundaries. Fourth, it regularly evaluates its policies to ensure that they continue to reflect its values and perspectives.

## Educate your constituents

People have a variety of perceptions about why a school board exists. Some parents view the board (or even individual board members!) as the final authority in all matters - a force with veto power over all decisions made by teachers or administrators. Some people expect the board to "protect" the congregation's resources. Whatever the case, the work of the school board can get very complicated when it attempts to measure up to a wide variety of expectations.

Time invested in educating the school's constituents about the purpose and activities of the board is time well spent. When people understand the board's role, they are less likely to

approach the board with inappropriate matters. School brochures and handbooks, parent orientation sessions, congregation voter meetings, school open houses and board listening posts all hold great possibilities for communicating the board's purpose and building a consistent understanding of the board's role.

## Select the right people

Not every person has the gifts to serve on a school board. Good board members have a passion for the

school's ministry and demonstrate personal support for the school. They possess not only good analytical, but also interpersonal skills. They are able to function as part of a team, contributing to discussion, listening,



and working with others to reach mutually acceptable decisions. And, perhaps most important, they are able to keep the welfare of the school and all its students ahead of personal interests.

The work is greatly enhanced and made easier when qualified people serve on the school board. Attention paid to the process of identifying, recruiting, and selecting board members makes a difference in how the board is able to do its work and what it is able to accomplish.

## Invest in Board education

It is important to realize that most people who serve on school boards have little or no prior board experience. Prior experience is no guarantee of skill either, since the effectiveness of boards in both public and private sectors varies greatly. Board member education is always needed to help build common understanding of the purpose and procedures required to govern effectively.

Board education can take place in a variety of ways. Taking a few minutes during each meeting to discuss an article or a chapter from a book that each board member has read can be very effective. Inviting a speaker or workshop leader

to guide the board through some aspect of the governance process can also be very helpful. Some Lutheran school boards gather with other schools in the area once or twice a year to learn and to share. And, of course, board retreats can be an extremely worthwhile investment of time, helping board members learn and build positive working relationships.

## Learn from past mistakes and successes

Someone defined insanity as continuing to do the same thing that didn't work before and expecting a different result. A board that wants to improve its effectiveness must be willing to take time to evaluate its efforts and make changes when needed. This can be done as simply as taking a few minutes prior to adjournment to reflect on the effectiveness of the meeting. Evaluation can also happen in more formal ways, such as using the results of written surveys as the basis for discussion and planning.

The work of your school board will never be easy. The ability of the school to accomplish its mission today and tomorrow depends on the decisions your board makes. But, choosing to invest your board's time and energy in

preventative maintenance will ultimately make your work more manageable and enjoyable. May God be with you to that end!

### *For Further Discussion*

Recall a time when you felt overwhelmed by the amount of work and time your service on the school board required. What were some of the issues and activities in which the board was involved at that time? In retrospect, how could the board have done things differently in order to keep its work more manageable?

### *For Further Study*

One excellent resource for helping manage your board meetings is Cornerstones for Christian Committees. It is filled with activities that take only a small investment of time during a meeting but that can significantly help board members grow and work together. It is available for \$19.95 plus shipping from the author, Kurt Bickel, at 446 Bonifay Ave., Orlando, Florida 32825 (407-249-0079).

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