

On Board

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Do we really need a board?

Do you ever wonder whether the efforts of your school board make a difference? Are your board's efforts ever criticized? Does this criticism bother you? This issue of ON BOARD addresses the important question of board value. It is designed to help you consider the contributions your board makes to the success of your Lutheran school.

During a recent meeting of Lutheran school principals, a participant was overheard sharing frustrations about his school board. A colleague nodded in agreement and wondered aloud whether all the work she invested in working with her board was worth it. Their interest was immediately heightened when yet another principal joined the conversation and told the others that her school is operating without a school board because the board was viewed as unnecessary by other leaders in the congregation.

Board members from most Lutheran schools would be very surprised to hear such comments. Why are school boards the subject of such criticism? Why is the value of a school board sometimes questioned?

The Question of Value

Governing boards are a staple of most public and private institutions in the United States. In the not-for-profit world, a board must exist in order for an organization to achieve tax-exempt status. Boards are assumed to provide credibility to the institutions they serve. They also fulfill a legal role by serving as the official representative of the institution in many official transactions, such as loans, contracts and grants. As any board member knows, the effort involved in carrying out board

responsibilities can be considerable. The process of recruiting, selecting, and nurturing a board requires significant time and energy. And, due to the nature of its structure, board management and decision-making can be complex processes that slow down and



complicate the efforts of the organization. Because this is so, a board's value is sometimes questioned by board members, administrators and others. This is true not only in Lutheran schools, but also in other organizations and

agencies. According to Maureen Robinson, author of Nonprofit Boards that Work, "In many organizations, the board is viewed in a way similar to an appendix, a part of the body without apparent purpose but capable of serious inconvenience."

No one likes to be called an appendix! However, many Lutheran school boards may be more at risk for this description than other boards. Most Lutheran school boards work within a larger governing structure of the congregation. This increases the chances for misunderstanding about the school board's role and authority.

Why are boards valuable?

There are a number of specific ways that boards are valuable to an organization. Maureen Robinson suggests the following:

- **Accountability and trust** – Boards are designed to safeguard the integrity of the organization they serve. Boards are responsible for insisting on accountability within the organization to assure that the mission is being pursued and that high standards of ethics are maintained. This is not to suggest that administrators and staff persons can't be trusted to be accountable. Rather, the board serves as an extra layer of oversight, which helps reassure and build trust among all those who support the school's ministry.
- Perhaps this aspect of a **board's value** is most apparent when there is a problem. As Robinson observes, "For nonprofit organizations to operate with the public's consent and with its support, someone must be understood to be acting with the public's interest firmly in mind." People who utilize the services or products of an organization or who support it financially expect oversight by an objective and informed group of people.
- **Transparency** – Since boards are comprised of people who are part of the "ownership" of the organization, their presence assures that the organization's activities are carried out in the public view. Again, when decisions and methods are "transparent" to its owners and the public, trust in the organization increases.
- **Diversity and balance** – The varied backgrounds, skills and experiences of board members bring value to an organization. A variety of viewpoints can be a catalyst for creativity and can provide assurance that various a variety of perspectives are being considered. Since board members are usually not part of the staff of an organization, a board can also provide a helpful balance to the ideas and perspectives brought by the administrator or staff.
- **Advocacy** – Effective board members

believe deeply in the mission of the organization they serve. Because they are investing significant time, energy and resources, the board and its members are in an ideal position to publicly support the mission of the organization.

- **Gathering resources** – In their role as advocates, board members also bring value to an organization by telling the story to potential donors and supporters. Board members help open new networks of people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to hear and respond to the organization's story.



Is a board always necessary?

Having governing board is a requirement for any not-for-profit organization, including congregations and schools. However, in the case of Lutheran schools, there may be situations where a school board is not absolutely necessary.

Most Lutheran schools are owned and operated by a single congregation. In these schools, the congregation is the official governing body and has ultimate authority regarding the operation of the school. The governing board of the congregation is usually a church council or board of directors. Therefore, within this structure, the school board holds no legal status as a governing body.

Such is not the case in schools that are operated independently from a congregation or in schools that are owned by an association of congregations. In these schools, it is likely that the school board serves the governing body.

Even when a school board is not an official governing entity, it can still bring value to the school. A board can provide accountability, transparency, diversity, advocacy, and resource

gathering to assist in the operation of the school. This is most likely to happen when there is a clear understanding between the congregation's governing body and the school board regarding the extent of the school board's authority.

Boards of schools owned and operated by a congregation can be valuable in other ways. They can serve in an advisory capacity to the church's governing board or to the school's principal. They can operate as a working committee, helping with specific tasks or projects. In fact, the boards of congregation-owned schools could most accurately be called advisory committees or task forces. Regardless of the name, the key is to make sure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, understood and communicated to all members of the school and church community.

While rare, it is possible for congregation owned and operated schools to function without any school board or similar group. In this scenario, the church governing body has responsibility for governing the school without assistance from any school focused board or committee.

Building the value of your board

As a Lutheran school board or committee member, you invest significant time and energy to on behalf of your school. You want your efforts to make a difference – to be of value in achieving your school's mission. Here are some things you can do to help ensure that your board's efforts continue to bring value to the school ministry:



- **Recruit quality board members** – The value of your board is dependent on the quality of its members. Place priority on identifying and recruiting people of integrity, who understand and support the mission of the school and who put the success of the

school ahead of personal interests.

- **Clearly define roles and goals** – For your board to be effective, members must understand the board's role and how it relates to other boards of the congregation as well as to the school administrator. Armed with this information, your board can develop specific goals to guide its activities, thus keeping its efforts focused and valuable to the school's success.
- **Advocacy** – A significant value you and your board bring to the school ministry is your ability to advocate on its behalf. Find ways to help educate congregation and community leaders about the mission of the school and what is needed to achieve the mission. Invest your time in building cooperation among school, congregation, and community leaders to address the needs of the school.
- **Personal support** – Hand in hand with advocacy is demonstrating personal support for the school. Be visible at school events, speak well of the school principal and faculty, and contribute to school fund-raising efforts.
- **Care for the school administrator** – Your school principal or director is, arguably, your school's most important single asset. Your board is very valuable to the school community when it has a positive relationship with the principal and when it cares about the health and wellness of this key leader.
- **Be a model faith community** – Your board has a wonderful opportunity to model faith-based leadership in the way you carry out your work. Take time to care for one another, to pray together and to seek God's help in listening, discerning and making wise decisions. Doing so makes your board a valuable model to the congregation and community.

For further discussion

For what qualities would you like your school board or committee to be valued? If you did a survey of your school community tomorrow, how would you be rated on these qualities? What steps could you take to increase your board's value?

For further study

The resource referenced in this issue of ON BOARD, Nonprofit Boards that Work, provides some excellent insights into the reasons boards exist and the value that they bring. The author is Maureen K. Robinson. It is published by John Wiley & Sons.

P.S.

Looking for a great chapel offering project for your next school year that helps your students make a difference for kids around the world in Christ's name? The *Giving Gardens* project, sponsored by Wheat Ridge Ministries, provides climate appropriate seeds and training for growing vegetable gardens for families living in poverty in Haiti and Uganda. A variety of on-line materials are available to help educate children, teachers, and parents about the need for this important effort. For further information, go to www.wheatridge.org.

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