

# Principals and Boards: A Team

**E**very organization must have a system of governance—to define the purpose of the organization and state how its resources will be allotted to achieve that purpose. Sometimes, governance decisions are made by one person. But most organizations employ some sort of group effort for decision-making on major aspects of operation. Such a group is frequently referred to as a board.\*

In some cases, the board manages the organization, while in others, it simply approves or disapproves of decisions made by professional managers.

Almost all Adventist schools have governing boards. Their effectiveness is as varied as the schools they govern. Dealing with the school board is a major function of school administration, but how to do so effectively is seldom taught in education courses. The reason for this is, at least in part, that very limited research exists on the effectiveness of boards, as well as administrators' methods of dealing with them. Thus, one must rely on personal observations and experience as a guide. And it is from my experience, both as an administrator and as a board member, that I draw my perspectives for this article.

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## The Purpose of Boards

What is the purpose of the governing board of an Adventist school? Is it to manage the school or to affirm the management decisions of the principal? I believe the answer is “neither.” Rather, boards can effectively serve three major functions: policy making and enforcement; oversight of school operations; and cheerleading for the institution.

*Policy Making and Enforcement.* The board should determine the policies to govern the school, leaving the administrators to implement those policies.

When these two aspects of policy get mixed up, trouble rages between the school board and the principal. Boards do not do management well; principals frequently overlook important aspects of policy development.

Policy is nothing more than a statement of intentions about the major operating goals of the school. It often encompasses a number of areas, ranging from building projects to spiritual-life ac-

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\* John Carver, *Boards That Make a Difference* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).



tivities. One such goal might be to operate within a balanced budget. How to achieve this is usually best left to the school principal. If the principal does not take policy seriously, the board may be tempted to step in and assume the role of management. A wise principal will do his or her best to function within the policies set by the board.

*Oversight of School Operations.* A business friend of mine has a favorite saying that applies to this function: “You get what you inspect, not what you expect.” This may sound harsh, but my experience indicates that it is usually true. An effective school board inspects the school and its operations on a continuous basis. This does not mean that individual board members are constantly snooping around the classrooms, but they must be knowledgeable enough about school operations to ensure that board decisions are being implemented and that the policies are accomplishing their intended purpose.

*Cheerleader for the School.* The board should be proud of the school and the mission it carries out on behalf of the church. Individual board members should speak out publicly in support of the school and should help recruit students. If they do not feel comfortable in this role, they will probably not be effective members of the board.

### **The Principal’s Role**

So, what does the principal do while the board is making policy, overseeing operations, and promoting the institution?

The effective principal develops a positive relationship with the board and its individual members by keeping them informed about school operations—and more specifically, how board policies are being implemented. The principal also plays a leadership role by recommending possible policy changes to the board. He or she makes sure that the board has the necessary information to

oversee the school operations. This means that boards should be kept fully informed about finances, the teaching/learning process, the spiritual health of the institution, and the school’s interface with parents. I have found, as an administrator, that the more open I have been with boards on such matters, the more they trusted my judgment to make sound management decisions.

Boards work most effectively when the school has an effective administrator. In fact, the most important policy decision a board can make is selecting the school’s leader. If they make a bad choice, nothing else will function right.

**T**he principal has two major functions in relation to the board. First, to manage the school well within the policies of the board. When a school is poorly managed, the board and its individual members are tempted to

## *What is the purpose of the governing board of an Adventist school?*

involve themselves in its daily operations. This usually does not work well and often leads to conflict, which limits the effectiveness of the teachers and administrators.

The principal also has a leadership role with the board. He or she should not only provide the information needed for the board to carry out its oversight function, but also inform the board about the effectiveness of its policies. This means proposing new policy or modifications to existing policies if they are not working well. This leadership role is especially important in relation to instruction. The principal is the professional educator and knows, or should know, more about the educational process than the board does. It is his or her responsibility to keep the board informed about the latest research on curriculum and instruction and help the board create policies that support best practices in instruction.

In public schools, the superintendent interacts directly with the board. However, the principal usually assumes this role in Adventist schools. In fact, it is not unusual for the principal to be a voting member of the church school board or even to serve as its secretary. In most public schools, such a situation would be considered an illegal conflict of interest. However, I have seen it work well for the principal of an Adventist school to have more direct involvement with the board. Yet, the principal must be careful not to become overbearing in the policy-making process. If he or she is seen as exercising too much power, board members may feel resentful at their own powerlessness and cease to give full support to the school, or disengage themselves from active involvement on the board. In either case, the school suffers.

### **Board Membership**

In Adventism, as well as in other venues, there is a wide diversity of opinion about who should serve on a school board. Some feel that only

people who are knowledgeable about educational issues should be on a school board, while others believe that a board should consist mainly of parents. Then, there is the matter of diversity—ensuring representation of the various subgroups of the church on the board. I confess that I have changed my mind on this issue over the years as I have worked with boards both as an administrator and as a board member.

**O**ne theory of board membership is that people on boards represent a specific constituency as they make decisions. In other words, they function as delegates for the subgroup. Thus, every subgroup in the church

should have delegates on the board. They then vote in the subgroup's best interest on issues that come before the board.

Another theory is that of trusteeship. The individual holds his or her position in trust for the larger constituency and votes the best interest of the school on issues that arise. My current thinking is that the trustee theory works better than the delegate theory.

Under the trustee theory, any member of the church constituency who is interested in the success of the school and willing to devote the necessary time and energy to serve on the board should be considered eligible for membership. This means that even people who have never had children enrolled in the school could serve on the board if they are willing to commit themselves to the success of the school. However, board members must be able to enthusiastically carry out their role as cheerleaders for the school. If their children are

## **When a Board Member Meddles**

Early in my tenure on a public school board, I was elected chair of the finance subcommittee. I soon discovered that the budget for the coming year was out of balance by \$65,000, and the superintendent had no plan to get it back in balance. "This budget is already bare bones, and there is nothing left to cut," he said. I insisted that we must have a balanced budget to present to the board, and the other members agreed.

I asked the business manager to give me a list of items that we might cut totaling over \$100,000. I wanted the finance committee to have some choices.

When I showed the list to the superintendent, he said that it would be bad to cut anything on the list, and he would have no part in it. I selected several items from the list that I thought would be least harmful to the educational program of the schools and that added up to the amount we needed to cut to balance the budget. I then recommended these cuts to the full board. They voted the cuts.

After the board meeting, one of the principals approached me with a great deal of concern. He explained the detrimental effect of one of the cuts we had just voted. "I could have given you several other items to cut that would not have hurt our program so much if you had only asked me," he said. As we discussed alternatives, I realized that I had indeed made a decision that was not in the best interest of the school district. I also realized that when a board member meddles in administrative matters, it frequently does not work out well. I should have discussed the cuts with the principals before presenting a proposal to the board.

not enrolled there, they will always be defending that choice and may not be able to function effectively on the board.

There is one caveat to the trusteeship theory of board membership—the matter of diversity. Boards usually make better decisions when the members come from a variety of backgrounds. If all members of the board are parents of young children or if they all work as accountants, the board will lack the diversity of experience that makes for creative group decision making. While members should not feel compelled to represent the subgroups of which they are a member, the board should have a variety of people as members so it will be as effective as possible.

This matter of diversity is especially important in schools that serve a multicultural or multi-ethnic community. People from different cultural backgrounds frequently have varied perspectives on educational issues that come before the board. The board as a whole makes better decisions on matters of policy if these perspectives are presented at meetings. However, I do not believe it is helpful to expect board members to represent their own ethnic group. Rather, they are most effective when they speak to issues from their own personal experience and viewpoint. Viewpoint diversity is more valuable to a successful board than ethnicity.

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### **Board Meetings**

I have witnessed large variations in how board meetings are conducted. One board of which I was a member several years ago had no agenda or specific plan of operation. The members just gathered around a table and talked about the school and

the problems it faced. After a couple of hours, the board chair would say, “Well, I guess there is nothing more to talk about, so we might as well adjourn and go home.”

I witnessed the other extreme when I recently attended a board meeting as an observer. The agenda was carefully planned, with each item given a certain number of minutes for discussion. The chair cut off discussion precisely at the designated time.

The agenda item on finance contained a number of rather complex reports. Yet, the chair limited discussion because “we must stay on schedule.” The board voted each item as it was presented with only perfunctory discussion.

I believe an effective board should operate somewhere between these extremes. There should be a carefully developed agenda that guides the discussion.

Many boards have active subcommittees that deal with substantive policy issues before they come to the full board. One board on which I was a member used subcommittees to develop the agenda. Each committee did a lot of groundwork before an item was discussed by the full board. At first, I saw this process as quite cumbersome, but soon discovered that it worked well because items on the agenda had been well researched

## **An Expensive Decision**

Some years ago, the conference superintendent visited a one-room church school and stayed for the evening meeting of the board. The main agenda item was a request by the teacher to purchase a heavy-duty jump rope for playground use at a cost of \$22. One of the board members suggested a cheaper one he had seen in a catalogue for \$16. The board debated this issue for half an hour, discussing the merits of wooden handles versus plastic ones and the proper length of the rope. Finally, the superintendent asked the members, most of whom were professional people, what their time was worth. “You have just spent \$400 worth of your time making a six-dollar decision,” he said. The board members sheepishly agreed and left the jump rope decision to the teacher.



and developed by the time the full board dealt with them.

In most cases, the principal works with the board chair to develop a meeting agenda. Any board member can request discussion of a specific item by asking the principal to put it on the agenda, but generally the principal should already be aware of issues that need to be brought to the board. I have found it effective for the principal and the chair to discuss each

agenda item well in advance of the meeting so they can guide the discussion. That does not mean they should conspire to force their opinions on the rest of the board, but they need to be aware of possible differences of opinion as well as have the necessary information available so the board can make informed decisions. I have found that it works best when the principal and the chair can come to some general agreement on major is-

sues before the board meeting.

### Some Problems

Boards are most effective if they concentrate on their two main functions: policy and oversight. When they get involved in the details of school management, they usually become ineffective, and teacher morale may plummet. When boards meddle in management, it is usually because the principal has fallen short in that area. Principals who do a good job of managing the school usually have boards who are happy to let them do so.

Nearly every board has at least one member with a personal agenda or who does not function well in an environment that requires cooperation. If this is not dealt with, the entire board may become dysfunctional. A principal can exercise leadership in such cases by trying to find out what motivates such members and what issues they have with the school or its operation. Sometimes, making such people feel that they are a part of the inner circle of decision makers is all

## Communication

I was asked to mentor the principal of a metropolitan Adventist school who was having difficulty with his board. In our discussions, I asked him when he last talked to the chair of the personnel committee. "Oh, I haven't talked to him for several weeks," he replied. "There haven't been any personnel issues on the agenda for at least three months, so there has been no reason to talk to him."

I tried to explain to the principal the need to maintain good communication with board members even in the absence of agenda items. His response was to send a weekly memo to the board chair and chairs of the subcommittees regarding happenings at the school. It came as no surprise to me that the personnel committee recommended that the principal not be offered a contract for the upcoming year.

that is needed to coax them to take a more cooperative role. In other instances, they may have personality traits that cause them to spread their angst to everyone with whom they come into contact. I know of no magic formula for dealing with such individuals. However, the principal and board chair must work together to show respect to the problem member while ensuring that he or she does not dominate the board or keep it from functioning effectively.

### Some Final Thoughts

Over the years, I have observed a variety of situations on boards of Adventist schools, as well as other organizations. I have seen administrators totally dominate their board, which functioned primarily as a rubber stamp. At the other extreme, I have observed boards essentially at war with their administrative leader. Both situations are detrimental to the institution. A better plan is for the principal and the board to function in their own sphere of responsibility while maintaining a spirit of mutual respect for the work of the other. Generally, the school principal must take a strong leadership role to ensure this type of mutually beneficial relationship.

**T**he principal has both a leadership and a management role with the board. By exercising leadership, he or she develops positive relationships with and among the board members and can initiate policy that will help the school more effectively fulfill its mission. But above all, he or she must exercise spiritual leadership. As the board is led to see its responsibility of helping the school achieve its mission, many of the usual problems of such groups will diminish. The principal will have more credibility in all areas of responsibility if he or she is seen as a spiritual person who deals with people and issues in a fair and unbiased manner.

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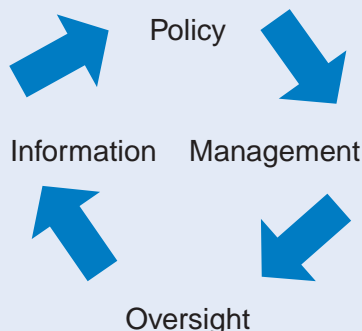
In matters of management, the principal not only handles the business of the school, but also the details of the board. He or she must see that the room is set up for the meeting, that materials are prepared when agenda items require supporting information, that notices of the meeting are sent out well in advance, and that he or she is prepared to speak knowledgeably about the issues that come before the board. Good management requires open communication with individual board members, especially the chair and other officers.

Traditionally, in the Adventist system, board meetings have been closed, and their discussions have been considered confidential. My experience on the public school board is just the opposite—most meetings are open to the public. Open meetings usually lead to a healthier climate in the community. When discussion and actions occur in the open, the rumor mill has little fuel to run on. Confidential discussions at board meetings seldom remain so. Early in my career as a church school teacher, I discovered that my students knew about actions of the board well before the teachers did! How much better if everything had been decided in the open. There are items, however, such as discussions about discipline and employment termination, that must be dealt with in closed session.

As I stated early in this article, there is little research on the best way for a school board to operate. What I have presented here is the result of my observations as a participant on a number of boards in a variety of settings over a period of many years. I have tried to emphasize what worked well and note what caused problems. I hope that these observations will be helpful to principals and boards seeking to enhance the success of their schools. ✍

### The Governance Cycle

Governance of any organization, including a school, is continuous and cyclical. Boards should develop policy, and administrators should implement policy managing the school. Boards should provide oversight to ensure that policies are implemented and to assess the results. Administrators provide leadership by giving boards the information necessary to carry out their oversight responsibility as well as to develop new policy.



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