

Streamlining the Adventist School Board

BY KARL W. KIME

Adventist K-12 schools are overseen by large boards whose members are drawn from churches and institutions in the local school community, as well as ex officio members from conference and union headquarters. Considering that the denomination currently has elementary and secondary schools worldwide, it is remarkable that laypersons play such a prominent role in the governance of this system.

Nevertheless, this system can be improved. It's not unusual for people with relatively little commitment to the task to be appointed or elected to school boards. Many members attend meetings sporadically, if at all. Because service is voluntary and unpaid, members may view the position as requiring little work or commitment. Active engagement in the strenuous tasks of fundraising and strategic long-range planning is not required for board membership, and hence is not a priority for many board members.

At the opposite pole is the tendency of many boards to micro-manage the school's day-to-day operations. Both problems are exhibited in both small and large schools—occasionally at the same time!

This article explores one school's attempt to cure board dysfunction. The author is chairman of the board, a lawyer, and a member of the school's constitution and by-laws committee. Under the leadership of the principal and other members of the constitution and by-laws committee, the institution has embarked on an ongoing experiment in restructuring its board. In just one and a half school years, the results have demonstrated that the experiment is headed in the right direction.

The new arrangement has shifted the power from the 70+ member school board to a smaller management committee. This has resulted in a significantly more efficient board—so much so that the next step in the constitutional experiment may be to permanently replace the board with the management commit-

tee. A smaller board would more closely resemble the boards of secular schools and corporations, which typically include a limited group of individuals with a strong personal and professional stake in the success of the organization. Although such boards are far from perfect, they do exhibit the advantage of efficiency and responsiveness to the interests of the larger communities they serve.

Background of Experiment

For the purposes of this article, the school where this structural change has been made will be called "SDAA," short for Seventh-day Adventist Academy. Use of this generic term underscores the fact that this structure could be adopted by a variety of Adventist schools. SDAA is a large, 100-year-old, K-12 school located near an Adventist hospital and conference office in a highly urban area. It is supported by 20 constituent churches, each of which, whether or not any of its student-age members attends SDAA, is required to pay a subsidy based upon the size of its congregation.

Although most Adventist K-12 schools in North America are smaller than SDAA, the problems of board governance tend to be the same, regardless of size. Thus, the structure being implemented at SDAA may be applicable in other Adventist schools as well.

The Advantages of Small Group Governance

SDAA's attempt to improve its board's functioning began with rewriting the constitution and by-laws of the school. This was

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done in response to recurring problems in board functioning. Occasionally, a few members with a particular passion dominated debate, excluding others from board discussions. Many board members became disengaged to the point of ineffectiveness; they assumed that “someone else” would do the work and therefore did not participate in board deliberations. Debate was sometimes nonexistent, sometimes shrill, and only occasionally helpful. There was nothing particularly unusual or unique about the SDAA board; these tendencies exist in many boards. In response to the need for change, the constitution and by-laws committee undertook a serious effort to modify the structure of the board. The rationale for the changes was simple: Small groups operate more efficiently.

The decision to vest power in the hands of a smaller, core management committee was based on the model of public school boards and corporations. Despite their shortcomings, U.S. public school boards usually have some members¹ who have to face public elections. Because their size is limited, public school boards tend to ac-

quire a higher degree of concentrated expertise, and thus can delegate tasks to lower levels within the hierarchy. Board members who face public scrutiny at election time generally take their tasks seriously. Of course, this is not to imply that public school boards do not have problems, among which one might count the impossible task of pleasing a radically diverse population, along with the sometimes corrosive effects of injecting electoral politics into what should be positions dedicated to the education of American children.

By contrast, Adventist school boards tend to be very large. The board at SDAA has more than 70 members. But only about 20 show up for the regular meetings, in large measure because the enormous membership creates redundancies and causes members to think that their opinions don't matter much.

Large boards rarely function well. One root cause may be analogous to the problem political scientists see in represen-

tative government. A well-functioning democracy has leaders at various levels who can distill the disparate viewpoints of their constituents, debate those viewpoints, and then engage in negotiation and compromise to achieve a set of shared goals. A small governing body fosters these qualities by keeping members involved. Each member of a small group must “own” the position he or she takes and cannot hide in the anonymity of a large group. Social sanctions are more effective in small groups. The member with an idiosyncratic view “sticks out” more, causing members to focus more acutely on the need for unity and agreement. Small group debate thus tends to be more “on point” and productive.

The governing board should be large enough to represent the views of the wider constituency, but small enough to provide an effective forum for debating disparate points of view. SDAA's experience indicates that groups begin to lose their effectiveness when they exceed 15 members.

In rewriting the SDAA's board's constitution and by-laws,² the subcommittee se-



riously considered reducing the size of the board to the number of people who usually attend—15 or so. But we were concerned that because there was already such poor attendance, reducing the large board's size might mean that even fewer people would show up. We also confronted the issue of political legitimacy. If the board size shrank precipitously, constituents might think their views were not properly represented. Paradoxically, small group government is *more* effective in representing views than large, unwieldy groups, as explained above. But convincing those in the Adventist school community of this takes time. Therefore, we have kept the general board size the same. This is something we can revisit in future years.

Maintaining Representation While Vesting Power in a Small Board

The unique feature of the new constitution is that the school drastically cut the number of full board meetings and vested greater power in the management committee. The board now meets only five times a year (instead of 10 times). The 15-member management committee (known in some schools as the “finance committee”) meets every month. Virtually all significant board actions are drafted in the management committee and come as recommendations to the full board.

Meetings of the full board now consist primarily of discussions regarding the management committee's recommendations. Because members of the smaller committee are also board members, they are able to address the questions posed by the full board. This has improved the quality of debate in board meetings. Board members have the right to discuss actions that have been voted by the management committee, and must ratify its recommendations. But placing the rough work of

deliberation in a smaller forum improves the quality of debate in the full board sessions.

The Role of the “Constituency Board”

The primary stimulus for the change in SDAA's structure was the problem caused by the so-called “constituency board,” which meets once every spring. Many Adventist schools may have a structure similar to this; even small church schools associated with a single congregation. Yet even relatively small constituencies may exhibit the same problems found in larger institutions.

SDAA's constituency meeting is a very large, “super” board event that includes delegates from the 20 constituent churches in addition to the entire standing board and members of the faculty. The meeting is so large that it has to be held in the chapel. It frequently attracts as many as 100 people, particularly when the agenda includes “hot” issues. But the role of the constituency board was ill-defined in the prior constitution. Its few enumerated powers included voting on subsidy increases,

major capital projects, and changes to the constitution and by-laws of the school. Beyond that, only tradition reigned.

Part of that tradition, for reasons shrouded in historical mystery, was voting on the school budget. The old constitution did not actually specify this power; rather, it was a function gradually assumed by the constituency board over the years. No one, even the “old timers,” could explain the basis for the tradition or recall when it began.

This “ultimate veto power” was problematic for the elected board. The constituency board, whose many delegates had very little connection to the school or knowledge of its problems, could undo in one vote months of budgetary planning by the elected board.

The most problematic aspect of the constituency's traditional power was its ability to veto proposed tuition increases. For months, the board and management committee, in conjunction with the school financial staff, would work on the budget. Tuition increases, of course, are inher-

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ently double-edged. Raising tuition allows the school to expand its educational programs, but may prevent some families from enrolling their children. Increases are therefore proposed only as a last resort. Before the annual constituency board, the SDAA elected board thoroughly debated proposed tuition increases. Under the old system, budgets with tuition increases were voted by the elected board and sent to the constituency board for final approval.

The constituency meeting occurred late in April, after all the work on the budget had been completed by the elected board. When tuition increases would be proposed, delegates from some of the churches with large numbers of economically challenged families would come for one purpose: to vote down the increase. Regardless of how compelling the financial need, some delegates would consistently oppose any tuition increase. If the nay vote was successful, the elected board would be forced back into emergency

sessions during the summer to cut the budget. The situation was occasionally so serious that the school had to terminate full-time employees under the “financial emergency” provision of their contracts.

The desire to keep tuition costs down is natural and understandable. But those involved with the operations of the school have a better understanding of what is required to keep the institution operational. In general, board members are parents whose children have been, or will be, enrolled in the school; thus they are sensitive to the hardships caused by tuition increases. This should provide sufficient representation for the interests of parents in the wider school community.

Under the new constitution, the management committee develops the budget, and the elected board has the final word.³ The constituency no longer has any say over the school’s budget or the tuition in-

creases contained in it. The rationale is that the elected board is a representative body whose members come from the churches and speak on their behalf. If a church wishes to take a position, it can do so through its representatives on the board. SDAA is trying to balance the interests of the larger community with the needs of the school, a daunting task in this era of diminishing student population and increasing educational demands.

The Small Board as a Deliberative Body—Why Dissent Is Good

Ideally the board should provide an arena that encourages spirited, rational discussion and dissent. In fact, dissent is

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the essential ingredient in any deliberative body. According to Cass Sunstein, of the University of Chicago School of Law:

“Organizations and nations are far more likely to prosper if they welcome dissent and promote openness. Well-functioning societies benefit from a wide range of views.”⁴

There is a statement attributed to the 18th century Scottish philosopher, David Hume: “Truth springs larger from argument amongst friends.”⁵ Apocryphal or not, the observation does point to a truth about the way groups function best. Sunstein writes that “the goal should be optimal conflict, not as much conflict as possible.”⁶ This is achieved only through committed members directed by a leader or leaders who are neither overbearing nor uninvolved.

The real-world example with which the author is most familiar is the jury system. It exhibits the polarities of small group dynamics. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a jury goes awry when its deliberations are unduly constricted. The jury works best when the members carefully consider all views, appropriately and temperately expressed in an environment of trust and cooperation.

For this reason, the primary characteristic that I use to eliminate jurors is the apparent tendency to lead too much—the domineering personality, seen in persons whose job description requires quick decisions and a high degree of independence. Strong opinions are fine, if counterbalanced by a willingness to listen to others and elicit as many opinions as possible. The free expression of views should be followed by a methodical consideration of all evidence in some kind of logical progression. Even if the conclusion of a legal case is fairly clear, agreement is best achieved through group deliberation.

The jury process produces less than optimal results when most members become disengaged and allow a conclusion to be reached without adequate airing of viewpoints. This problem, which some theorists have described as “groupthink,”⁷ is destructive to proper jury function. With so much at stake—whether “mere money” in a civil case, or one’s life or liberty in a criminal case—everyone involved

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hopes that the jurors will take their task seriously. School boards can suffer from similarly debilitating polarities—ineffectiveness born of indifference or of single-mindedness in a strong-willed subgroup. Yet the outcome of their decision-making is no less important than the result of a jury trial.

The larger the governing body, the more it tends to foster polarities in group debate—vigorously antagonistic nay-saying, driven by a few mavericks; or routine yea-saying, with diversity lulled into passivity by a lack of dissent. Neither constitutes effective board behavior. A school board, appropriately invigorated by reasonable dissent, is vital to a well-functioning school. Without dissenting voices, bad ideas will go unchallenged, and good ideas will not be polished and refined.

Trends

SDAA’s official elected board remains the size as it was before the constitutional change two years ago. But the management committee functions so well that the role of the large school board is becoming less clear. A secondary effect of placing so much power in the hands of the management committee is that as time passes, fewer members are attending sessions of the elected board.

Thus we appear to be on a short path to another decision point: whether to keep the full elected board, or replace it permanently with one the size of the current management committee. The advantages of a smaller operating board are numerous, as described above. The negatives are primarily “political”—the impression that the board is “less representative” of the wider church community, or that a smaller board is a cabal, driven by the will of a few. Some may feel that these are reasons enough to maintain a larger board.

But these potential problems can be addressed through transparency regarding the board processes, inviting commu-

nity members to attend board meetings, and frequent reports to the constituent churches and their own boards. The best argument for eliminating the large school board is the success of the small management committee. Our experiment in governance is ongoing, but the advantages of the new system are clear. Small governing bodies provide for direct, expeditious decision-making while still using representative, deliberative procedures. Projecting current trends into the future, it seems likely that this model for school board structure will be beneficial. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, is the second largest in the United States, with more than 700,000 students, but it operates with only seven elected members of the school board and one superintendent. See <http://www.lausd.net>.

2. The modern practice, at least for small non-profit institutions, is to place these in a single, two-part document.

3. It still retains the power to vote on church subsidy increases, major capital projects, and changes in the school’s constitution and by-laws. Even if the current board is eventually replaced by a smaller operating board of 12-15 members, a constituency meeting would remain necessary to ratify these types of proposals, since they directly affect the larger church community.

4. Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 210, 211.

5. From <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/000476.html> (accessed March 4, 2008).

6. Sunstein, *Why Societies Need Dissent*, op cit., p. 137.

7. James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), pp. 36-39.