

When a School Board Member Goes "ROGUE"



Although Seventh-day Adventist school boards have significant power to influence the schools under their care, they are not independent entities. They are guided by policies created and developed by local conferences, unions, and divisions, and are required to comply with their terms.¹ However, there are certain scenarios for which limited or little guidance is given. One such scenario is the “rogue” board member. According to the North American Division’s (NAD) *Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventist Schools*: “In instances where working policies of the local conference, union, or division are silent, the local school board is guided by the school’s philosophy and mission statement.”²

To “go rogue” means to act independently, erratically, and without concern for established protocols. According to Fuglei, “school boards with single or multiple members who work behind closed doors”³ to ignore the wishes of their constituents, or who choose to ignore the counsel of their oversight bodies—which in the case of Adventist K-12 schools are

the local conference or union of office of education and divisions at the higher education level—can cause enormous damage. Rogue school board members can “run roughshod over the norms and standards of behavior expected”⁴ of people appointed or elected to this office. These rogue members disregard best practices of school board membership, and in short, elevate their own interests and those of their friends over those of the schools and institutions they are called to serve.

Vick provides another definition, characterizing rogue board members as people who use “their authority outside the jurisdiction of the board as a whole. Often their actions are no longer serving the better good of the organization but instead are based on a personal agenda and what they feel is ‘right’ for the organization.”⁵

School board members who display these types of behaviors “interfere with a school’s ability to serve its students and constituency.”⁶ Fuglei further identifies several ways such rogue school board members are able to accomplish this. They include the following behaviors:

BY ROBERT D. CRUX

- “Disregarding ideas from the school superintendent;
- Behaving counter to written (or unwritten) rules of conduct;
- Supporting policies that are not in students’ best interests;
- Making inappropriate deals with faculty, or other board members, in exchange for favors;
- Breaching the board’s code of ethics.”⁷

At the K-12 level, the local pastor and school board chairperson can play a pivotal role in correcting, restraining, and if necessary, facilitating removal of rogue school board members for inappropriate behaviors. Sadly, situations occur when it does not seem politically expedient for the pastor, the school board chairperson (at times, even the education superintendent or union/division director of education) to intervene due to the power and influence certain rogue school board members possess in their local church/school community.

In situations such as these, the whole school program is put at risk, and the reputation of Adventist education suffers. Ultimately, those that suffer the most are the students, parents, and teachers of the school. Parents end up enrolling their children in another school, and teachers may transfer to another job location due to the dysfunctional chain of authority and an unclear, and possibly compromised, mission of the school.

School boards can take measures to curtail and even prevent such scenarios from happening by ensuring that all members are committed to the educational and spiritual mission of the school and to the board’s established code of ethics, and by confirming that members understand their role as being part of a team. Board chairs can also be intentional in stating and upholding the requirements for board membership, along with cultivating a climate of servant leadership. While these steps may not prevent all rogue behavior by members, they will help school boards and their constituencies to be more vigilant in exercising care in selecting and electing members who will contribute to the school’s growth and success (see Box 1).

Board members must embrace and support the mission of the school.

Each school needs a clear, written mission statement. This will allow

new school board members to clearly comprehend the direction of the institution. More importantly, it will help prospective members decide if they want to align their own ideas and vision for the school with its stated mission before accepting the invitation to join the board. Board members become more effective participants in the governance of the institution when they understand that they will be held accountable for upholding the educational and spiritual mission of the school.

Knowing where the school is going encourages board members to be on the same page when it comes to knowing what to do, when, and why. Further, when it comes to shaping strategies and planning improvements for the school,

Box 1. Seventh-day Adventist School Board Membership Structure

Seventh-day Adventist school boards consist of regular and ex-officio members. Whether K-12 or higher education, a regular or ex-officio member of an Adventist school board must be a regular member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Others may serve in an advisory role only.

K-12 School Boards¹

At this level, each member elected by a constituent church, the principal, and the Home and School Association leader should have his or her membership in a constituent church.

Regular members: Typically, at least two members selected from each constituent church (and elected by the constituent churches). This includes one pastor from each constituent church. Additional members should be elected by constituent churches in accordance with the school’s constitution or working policies.

Ex-officio members: Typically, the principal and vice principal(s) of the school (day or boarding); the Home and School Association leader (especially if a day school); the superintendent of schools (or designate) for the local conference; the director of education (or designate) for the union conference; and the elected officers of the local conference.

Higher Education²

According to the *General Conference Working Policy on Education*, “Subject to applicable civil laws and regulations, members of the governing boards of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities shall be members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in regular standing. Others may serve in advisory capacities” (Working Policy FE 20 10).

Members on higher education boards are comprised of representatives from the church’s organizations such as the General Conference, division presidents, conference presidents within each division, directors of education, and individuals who represent a cross-section of the constituency served by the institution (*Working Policy FE 20 10*). Other members are individuals who are not employed by the institution and have no family members employed by, or conducting business with, the institution. Some institutions also require that a specified percentage of the board be lay members.

REFERENCES

1. *Inter-American Division School Board Manual for Secondary Schools* (2002): <http://circle.adventist.org/files/download/IADSecondaryBoardManual02.pdf>; *North American Division School Board Manual* (2018): https://nad-bigtincan.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/leadership%20resources/administration/handbooks%20%26%20manuals/SchoolBoard_Manual.pdf.
2. General Conference *Working Policy FE 20 10* (2018); AAA, “Governing Board Autonomy, Independence, and Accountability in Colleges and Universities—Guidelines” (2018): https://adventistaccreditin-gassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/governing_board_autonomy_independence_and_accountability.pdf.

using the mission statement as a primary reference point empowers each board member to serve more effectively and efficiently.

Board members must adhere to a code of ethics.

A code of ethics outlines the expectations and ethical principles that should guide each board member's behavior. This standard should be upheld by all who serve. The degree to which members adhere to the code of ethics can and should be evaluated. This is just as important as the evaluations of teachers and administrators. Creating a conference/union policy that supports board member evaluations is essential to controlling rogue board members.⁸ If no such policy exists, the board can seek counsel on creating one for local application.

At the K-12 level, the superintendent of education and conference administration can also assist with making accountability a priority, and at the higher education level, board chairs and college/university presidents can work together to provide training and board education.⁹ This can be done by making school board training webinars and other professional-development resources available to school boards to assist them in evaluating and reviewing their roles and responsibilities, as well as informing them about who to consult should problems arise. As boards learn what is expected of them and participate in their own evaluations, they will collectively learn to self-correct poor behaviors—or at least maintain a record of such.

Unfortunately, due to the level of scrutiny and/or commitment of time and resources demanded of board members, it can be a challenge in Seventh-day Adventist communities to find people willing to serve on school boards. This should not be an excuse to let dysfunctional behaviors continue or to refrain from holding school board members accountable to adhere to a code of ethics. School boards must not rationalize that: “he or she means well”; “we need his or her skills”; “we don’t want to offend him or her”; or “we’ll have a hard time finding anyone else to serve.” Instead, they must never be afraid or hesitant to enforce the procedures outlined in the constitution and bylaws of the institution (or of the conference, union, or division) for removing one or more rogue school members. As always, consultation with the legal counsel for the institution’s parent organization is strongly recommended before any action is taken.

Effective school board members understand that they are part of a team.

Board service is a team sport. According to Fuglei, “Generally speaking, a school board’s purpose is to facilitate the business of a school”¹⁰ under the guidelines and policies of the entities that provide oversight, which for Adventist schools would be the local conference and union K-12 education codebook, or the recommendations for setting guidelines at higher education institutions.¹¹ Board members act on behalf of the constituents of the school, and “although they may represent different points of view, it is essential for individuals on the school board to work in harmony with

each other as well as with administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders of the school.”¹²

Vick clarifies that being part of a team helps ensure that the board has a strategic plan and is able to stay focused on mission. Role descriptions and terms of reference are provided for each incoming school board member. The school constitution and bylaws are reviewed on a consistent basis to provide clear parameters of operation. The review should include the process for how to deal with rogue board members. (If no such process exists, one should be created.) Finally, a strong board-development committee can ensure a team approach by focusing on recruitment, training, and mentoring school board members.¹³

Effective school boards have a purposeful and collaborative relationship with the school’s administration, faculty, and staff, and with the community. They are able to “establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving the goals and mission of the school.”¹⁴ For school boards, this means actively involving the community and school personnel in setting goals and updating the school’s strategic plan. It means building a team that has clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the work the board proposes to do.

The strategy of employing board subcommittees and ad hoc committees to accomplish specific projects and tasks creates opportunities for collaboration with school faculty, staff, and community. Each committee should be guided by a “terms of reference” document (developed by the board in formal session) to help expedite its work and keep it on task. Using the faculty, staff, and community as consultants for this type of working structure also provides a variety of perspectives for the board to consider, with the possibility of creating stronger relationships both internally and externally.

Since the board usually has limited contact with the school staff and faculty, its members should consider how to obtain information and communicate it in a purposeful and positive manner. Scheduling regular meetings with the faculty and staff to provide in-depth briefings on policy changes/decisions will better control both the incoming and outgoing information flow and can serve as a team-building event and opportunity to bond and celebrate the successes of the school. Having clear goals for such meetings with built-in opportunities for listening and problem-solving will not only help to unify, but also reduce the potential of these meetings becoming grievance sessions. Creating a culture for effective communication with school personnel will help to limit the rogue member’s promotion of his or her own agenda in the school and community.

These types of communication and working structures (outlined above) can be effective ways to involve and inform various stakeholders of the school and mitigate the more-objectionable traits of a potential rogue member. Involving stakeholders in the goals and strategic plans of the school, as well as using communication structures that better control the information flow, will help prevent the board from being distracted by the personal agendas of individual members.

Crucial to the success of any school program is the ability

of the school board chair to manage conflict. If the chair seeks to avoid conflict rather than address it, or mishandles conflict, this could cause long-term consequences and damage to the school. Understanding what is expected from everyone at the beginning of a project/task and communicating how the work will be accomplished will save a lot of time, in-fighting, and missed opportunities to advance the educational program of the school. How boards conduct business is as important as the business they conduct.

Being part of a team includes supporting the chair in removing obstacles that hinder the work of the board. Therefore, when it comes to managing a rogue member of the board, the chair needs to have voted protocols and procedures in place to guide him or her. The chair should first communicate individually with the rogue member, soliciting his or her full support of the board's code of ethics and the role and responsibilities of board members as outlined in the school's constitution/bylaws. As a next step (if necessary), the chair and another school board official (pastor, superintendent of education, or ex officio member of the board) should meet with the rogue member to request compliance with the adopted code of ethics and/or the school constitution and bylaws that specifically relate to school board membership. Should these steps fail to obtain the cooperation and compliance of the rogue member, the chair must consider the person's removal from board membership. Removal could include recommending that the individual resign, take a leave of absence, or for egregious offenses, be removed by an official vote. The process for executing each of these options should be clearly outlined in the board's constitution and bylaws, and records of all communication and efforts to resolve the situation should be carefully documented and stored. Most importantly, board chairs facilitating this process should consult and work closely with legal counsel to ensure that all involved are given due process.

Canosa has provided best-practice guidance when considering the removal of a board member. He indicates that "removal of a member from the board is a very serious matter and should never be taken lightly. At times, however, such a step must be considered."¹⁵ The circumstances or reasons that Canosa deems appropriate for removal are:

- "Prolonged non-attendance.
- Unethical, disruptive, or obstructive behavior that prevents the board from proceeding with its work or threatens its credibility.
- Profound conflict of interest.
- Breach of confidentiality or covenant.
- Any individual member action, not authorized by the vote of the board, that creates legal jeopardy for the board as a whole and/or the organization it serves."¹⁶

Due to the relationships and positions that board members may hold on other committees or offices at the church/conference/union levels, the removal of a rogue school board member can create tension between the person and the policy and become a severe test of loyalty for not only the board chair but also members of the board. This scenario can easily become clouded with shades of gray

blocking out the sunshine and transparency of sound policies that can offer guidance. Boards should carefully consider what is written in their constitution and bylaws and seek legal counsel before taking any drastic action. Rogue members should never be enabled because of their position, power, and influence over other board members.

School boards must be intentional about upholding requisites for membership.

Otten shares specific protocols to which school board chairpersons and executive committees should pay particular attention when dealing with incoming school board members. These guidelines can be shared by education superintendents or directors of education with those who elect and appoint board members to service (e.g., constituencies or organizations), increasing the likelihood of selecting individuals who understand their roles and can work as part of a team. Here are a few of them:

1. Make sure potential board members understand and embrace the school's mission and core values. If a school has not identified these, then they should be defined and adopted immediately.
2. Provide immediate orientation about the institution and the role of the board in serving the institution. A clear description of what is expected of each board member or trustee decreases the chances of having someone try to implement a personal agenda.
3. Carefully consider the personality of those nominated for election or appointment. While skills and expertise are important, the individual's temperament, willingness to serve, and ability to work well with others are absolutely crucial to building a team that can collaborate to accomplish goals.
4. Commit to annual evaluations of individual and collective board performance.
5. Uphold term limits as established by guiding policies as a way to prevent any one member from feeling as though he or she owns the position. Term limits for members, if instituted, must be enforced.¹⁷

Each of the above recommendations should be carefully and consistently implemented. School board chairpersons must be intentional about upholding requisites for board membership, and as often as possible, take the opportunity to carefully assess how well each member fits in with the current board membership, mission, and goals.

Effective school board members are servant leaders.

School board members are called to be servant leaders. Committed board members recognize that their service is not to be driven by a desire for power, but instead by a commitment to serve and to extend the mission of Adventist education as a ministry.¹⁸ Robert Greenleaf in *The Power of Servant Leadership* describes it this way: "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's priority needs are being served."¹⁹

Esther Dewitt, president of Conflict Navigation, observes

Sidebar 1. How Boards Can Avoid Being Derailed by the Difficult Board Member

that people-oriented servant leaders can effectively lead people toward embracing shared goals, enabling them to accomplish mission-driven tasks.²⁰ According to Dewitt, servant leaders:

- **Listen.** They understand the value of letting others speak; and recognize that there is wisdom in listening to the ideas, fears, concerns, and aspirations of those in their care.

- **Empathize.** Servant leaders are able to sensitively identify with and enter into the experiences of others and are keenly aware of how their decisions will impact those they serve and lead.

- **Persuade.** Instead of using their authority to demand or force others to comply, servant leaders understand the power of persuasion to motivate others toward shared goals.

- **Model integrity.** Servant leaders build and maintain relationships based on trust and integrity. They model adherence to shared standards within their institutions.

- **Help people grow.** Through coaching and mentoring, servant leaders nurture others within their respective institutions. They understand that investing in people will grow their institutions and create a path to success.

- **Build community.** Relationships are important to servant leaders, and they seek to cultivate an institutional culture that values and respects individuals, cooperation, and teamwork.²¹

Servant leadership is hard work and does not come naturally to most leaders and members of a school board. This leadership style may be viewed by some as revealing a lack of strength and an inability to make tough decisions. However, if we are to follow the example of Christ (consider what the apostle Paul wrote about Christ's humility in Philippians 2:3-8, NKJV), we must observe

Boards are designed to function with one voice. Yet, as with any group of dissimilar people, there are times when board members will disagree. A skilled board chair will manage multiple opinions by guiding the discussion, using organizational tools such as *Robert's Rules of Order*, and providing non-confrontational ways of getting each member to share his or her perspective on the journey to achieve consensus. Additional ways to prevent difficulties include having a clear mission, making sure board members understand their individual and collective roles, abiding by the constitution and bylaws, and nurturing a culture of training and mentoring of new members.¹

However, even with all these preventative measures in place, it is still possible to experience difficulties with one or more board members. What happens when a board member "goes rogue" by taking an action independent of the collective group? What if a member aggressively pushes a personal agenda or loudly criticizes other members of the board or the chair, becoming a "board bully"? What if a member discloses confidential information discussed by the board or has a serious conflict of interest? What recourse do boards have in these situations? Here are a few helpful suggestions for board chairs:

1. **Identify the source of the conflict and address it immediately.**² Matthew 18:15 to 17 gives biblical counsel for dealing with conflict. The first step is for the chair to speak with the person directly in a non-confrontational way. This includes listening carefully to what is being said, both verbally and non-verbally. Does the individual have a legitimate concern but appears unaware of his or her effect on other people? What is the true source of the conflict? Next, investigate. Did something happen that the individual perceives as a slight? Is this type of behavior atypical or also displayed in other areas of this individual's work? Squelch the temptation to judge the individual's actions, and make an effort to engage him or her in dialogue. As one author said, "An engaged dissenter is often of much greater value than an unengaged yes-man [or woman]."³ If the situation is not resolved at the individual level, then it may be necessary for the board chair to involve another trusted colleague and follow any protocols already in place, being careful to document any actions taken.

2. **Curtail the conflict immediately.** As much as possible, the chair should keep the conflict contained between those involved, resisting the urge to take the issue to the entire body. However, if the rest of the board (and/or the school family and community) already know about the conflict, the chair must not sweep the issue under the carpet. If it is already out in the open, he or she needs to address it, employing clear discussion protocols to keep the issue contained. The chair should consult with key advisors (e.g., public-relations experts, legal counsel, and those knowledgeable about how to manage social media) on how best to do this. When the board as a whole addresses these types of problems, it must make every effort to speak as a unified voice and to project strength. It is important to respond to the situation with facts, honesty, and transparency.

3. **Remove or isolate the difficult board member.** Despite the board's best efforts, it may be that removing the board member is the only option. The board chair should consult the constitution and bylaws regarding what actions the board can take, and most importantly, seek legal counsel before taking any drastic action. If there are no provisions for removing a board member, then the board must find a way to work with the individual. This may mean minimizing his or her role or responsibilities. If a board member is genuinely unhappy, then he or she should be encouraged to resign.

REFERENCES

1. Greg McRay, "Difficult People on Your Non-profit Board" (March 23, 2010): <https://www.501c3.org/difficult-people-on-your-nonprofit-board/>.
2. Kelly Otte, "Standing Up to Board Bullies Strengthens Organizations" (January 6, 2018): <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/money/2018/01/06/standing-up-board-bullies-strengthens-organizations/1010418001/>.
3. McRay, "Difficult People on Your Non-profit Board."

how a life of humility allowed Him to connect with people, resulting in positive change(s). If school board chairs and members purposely dedicate some time during their meetings to sharing what servant leadership means to them individually, this can be a purposeful way to reflect and refocus, and to build consensus on how the board should carry out its work.

School board meetings must advance and promote the mission and philosophy of the school. Each meeting should begin with prayer requesting the presence of the Holy Spirit so that members can be prompted and inspired to focus on those key issues that will enhance the school's academic and spiritual-life program. Leading with prayer will also help set the tone of the meeting and enable the Holy Spirit to influence the hearts and minds of members to be divinely motivated for unselfish service. Consider the following words:

"Let those who attend committee meetings remember they are meeting with God, who has given them their work. Let them come together with reverence and consecration of heart. They meet to consider important matters connected with the Lord's cause. In every particular, their actions are to show they are desirous of understanding His will in regard to the plan to be laid for the advancement of His work."²²

Conclusion

Local church congregations and conference, union, and division constituencies have placed an enormous degree of confidence and reliance in those appointed to serve as school board members and trustees. They believe in their school board and expect integrity in return. Board members, in turn, must be accountable to the educational mission of the school and to a code of ethics. Further, board members must understand that they are part of a team and should be committed to servant leadership. With effective policies in place, boards can establish a spirit of teamwork and limit the degree to which any single member or group of members manages to go rogue. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



Robert D. Crux, EdS, worked as a teacher, principal, and superintendent of schools over a period of 35 years in Adventist education before retiring from active service. He completed his MEd in School Administration at Walla Walla College (College Place, Washington, U.S.A.) and earned an EdS degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Loma Linda University (Loma Linda, California, U.S.A.). Prior to retiring in 2016, he served as Superintendent of Education and Human Resources Director at Carolina Conference (Charlotte, North Carolina, U.S.A.). Mr. Crux believes that school board behaviors have a substantial impact on the culture and success of schools.

Recommended citation:

Robert D. Crux, "When a School Board Member Goes 'Rogue,'" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:4 (October-December 2019): 21-26.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventist Schools: A Guide for School Boards and Board Members* (Silver Spring, Md.: North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists Office of Education, 2017), 16: https://nad-bigtincan.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/leadership%20resources/administration/handbooks%20%26%20manuals/SchoolBoard_Manual.pdf.

2. Ibid.

3. Terry O'Banion, "Damage Caused by the Rogue Trustee," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 33:7 (June 2009): 547-563; Monica Fuglei, "How Should Teachers and Parents Deal With a Rogue School Board Member?" (December 10, 2014): <http://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/news/rogue-school-board/>.

4. O'Banion, *ibid.*, 547.

5. Steve Vick, producer of audio podcast with Laurie Wolf, "Dealing With Rogue Board Members" (April 23, 2014): <https://nonprofitally.com/nonprofit-podcast-dealing-with-rogue-board-members/>.

6. Fuglei, "How Should Teachers and Parents Deal With a Rogue School Board Member?"

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. See Betty Bayer, "Professional Learning for Teachers and Board Members: The School Board's Responsibility," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:3 (July-September 2019): 24-27: <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2018.83.3.5>; Hamlet Canosa, "Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education Governing Boards: A Snapshot," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 70:5 (Summer 2008): 32-36. <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200870053205.pdf>.

10. Fuglei, "How Should Teachers and Parents Deal With a Rogue School Board Member?"

11. Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (AAA), "Governing Board Autonomy, Independence, and Accountability in Colleges and Universities—Guidelines" (2017): https://adventistaccreditingassociation.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/12/governing_board_autonomy_independence_and_accountability.pdf; General Conference *Working Policy* FE 20 10 (2018); see also CIRCLE's list of board handbooks and manuals for Adventist schools in various divisions: <http://circle.adventist.org/browse/748/>.

12. Fuglei, "How Should Teachers and Parents Deal With a Rogue School Board Member?"

13. Vick, "Dealing With Rogue Board Members."

14. Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien, "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards: Full Report," Center for Public Education (2019): <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards-report-december-2019.pdf?la=en&hash=1E19C481DAAEE25406008581AE75EB2ABA785930>.

15. Hamlet Canosa, "Governing Boards: A Practical Guide to Best Practices and Policies" (2008), 31: http://www.columbiaunion.org/sites/default/files/pictures/new_board_manual_07-081.pdf.

16. Ibid.

17. Laura Otten, "Board Members Gone Wild," The Nonprofit Center at LaSalle University (February 11, 2011): <https://www.lasalleonprofitcenter.org/board-members-gone-wild/>.

18. *Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventist Schools: A Guide for School Boards and Board Members*, 7.

19. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant Leadership* (San Francisco: Bennett-Kohler Publishers, 1998), 4.

20. Esther DeWitt, *Conflict Navigation* (August 31, 2017): <https://www.facebook.com/ConflictNavigation/>.

21. Ibid.

22. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 7:256.