

School Board Governance Training: Myth or Must?

Seventh-day Adventists operate one of the biggest parochial school systems in the world. There are 5,005 elementary schools, 1,214 secondary schools, and 99 colleges and universities.¹ The church's objective is to ensure that students receive a balanced education in harmony with denominational standards and ideals. Seventh-day Adventists believe that true education is more than the perusal of a certain course of study: "It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and the higher joy of wider service in the world to come."²

Adventist elementary and secondary institutions are operated by school boards with five basic areas of responsibility: curriculum implementation, personnel support, institutional finance, physical plant, and public relations. Local church members elect the members of these boards.

School board accountability and board assessment pose many questions, such as: What are the criteria for membership on the school board? Do school board members understand their roles? If not, is training provided to help them function more effectively?

Conference educational superintendents and school principals have received training to prepare them for the role of school leadership. However, most school board members learn through trial and error. According to the Illinois School Board Association, many members learn their roles "by the seat of their pants."³ Caruso says that it will take about a year before a board member gets "up to speed on such things as budget and policy."⁴

A questionnaire was recently given to school board members of Adventist day academies in the Southern Union Conference⁵ to request their opinions concerning board governance training, member role definition, and accountability. When asked about governance training, here is how they responded:

"They [school board members] just come in and assume a position."

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By Nathaniel G. Higgs and Elsie T. Jackson

“It [governance training] is one of the weaker links of our academies.”

“The older ones train the younger ones.”

“There is no attention to governance training . . . wrong decisions and confusion and misunderstanding result.”⁶

Generally speaking, school board members in the Southern Union believed that on-the-job training was the major method of board orientation. They agreed with Caruso that it takes at least a year or more for a new member to understand the operations of the board. They also stated their belief that a systematic program of governance training for new members and continuing education for experienced members could greatly enhance the effectiveness of school boards.

In general, survey respondents felt that governance training is needed for the following reasons: (1) to reduce confusion about role definitions, functions, and responsibilities of administrators as contrasted with those of the board; (2) to provide board members with general knowledge about their legal responsibilities for operating the school; and (3) to provide a system of accountability that ensures that the institution’s goals are achieved and that regular progress reports are made to the constituency.

Role Definitions

Role definition is often a source of tension between the school board chairperson and the principal. This conflict is not unique to Adventist boards. In a study

of public school boards conducted by Feuerstein and Opfer,⁷ 27 percent of the superintendents surveyed cited role definition as a cause of tension between themselves and the school board.

A recent teachers’ convention in the Lake Union Conference looked at school board relationships for principals. The educators were divided into four plenary groups to discuss different topics relating to Adventist school boards. Each group was given a question. Group Four’s question was, “What procedures would you suggest to create a positive relationship between the administrator and the board?” The number one recommendation was “training sessions to delin-

ate responsibilities.” First on the list was job descriptions, or who does what. The group agreed that conflict and misunderstanding often resulted from board members’ unfamiliarity with their roles and responsibilities.

The school board and its chair are empowered only when the board is in session or when members are authorized by the board to perform a certain responsibility during a given period. As a conference employee, the principal or head teacher is given the authority to administer the affairs of the school on a day-to-day basis. By virtue of this position, the principal is a member of the board and serves as its executive secretary. The principal’s responsibilities include, but are not



limited to, implementing board policies and maintaining school records and board minutes. The school board is the policy-making body. The administrator implements school policy and works with the board as a team member.

Legal Responsibilities

School board members are not immune from litigation and lawsuits seeking damages for alleged wrongdoing. Board members may be held personally liable for willful, wanton, and malicious acts. "Although few board members have been held personally responsible for their decisions, board members should know that the law of the land [in the U.S.] says they can be held responsible for a misuse of power and that their actions can [result in their being] fined or jailed."⁸ Therefore, it is important for board members to understand local, state, and national statutes that relate to school operations.

It is the responsibility of the school board to provide a safe learning environment for students. School property should be free from faulty,

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malfunctioning equipment, attractive nuisances,⁹ and environmental hazards. The school buildings and grounds should comply with all governmental health and safety codes.

"Defamation of character involves statements to third parties which have a tendency to reduce esteem, respect, and confidence of good will in which a person is held. Board members are immune for liability from statements made at school board meetings under the doctrine of *qualified privilege*. This doctrine is applicable when it is necessary that certain information be communicated for the protection of one's own interest, the interest of third parties, and the interest of the public. This information is best communicated only during executive sessions of the board." Any like commu-

nication disseminated in other than an executive session of the board may constitute defamation, and the board members may be held individually and/or collectively liable.¹⁰

A school board member can be held liable for loss or damage that results from his or her negligent acts as well as the negligent acts of an employee who is acting under the board member's direct supervision. Common sense and intuition are not a substitute for sound legal counsel. Governance training will familiarize board members with their legal responsibilities.

Accountability

School boards, like teachers and principals, must be accountable. The data received from the survey of Southern Union board members revealed that only a small percentage of the boards conducted any form of assessment. School board assessments should identify the objectives and purposes of the board and provide an avenue for accountability. They should also provide systematic feedback to school board members and the community.

A school board should establish regular procedures for evaluating its meetings and operations. The board should establish goals and a timetable for achieving them. It should periodically review the goals and match them with specific objectives. An assessment may be conducted once or twice a year. Board evaluation and assessment are conducted for the following reasons:

1. to enhance the credibility of the board;
2. to identify strengths and weaknesses;
3. to improve goal setting and specify areas of improvement; and
4. to keep the public and the board members better informed about the board's progress in achieving its goals.¹¹

A board whose members are generally compatible with one another and comfortable with the principal



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can employ a do-it-yourself method of assessment, using a checklist of major features of effective board meetings as a springboard to open the discussion. Contentious, badly split boards should hire a process facilitator. Board meetings will never improve until members agree to work cooperatively. The National School Boards Association can provide instruments for school board evaluations.¹²

Assessment may reveal the need for objective analyses. One helpful approach is to obtain third-party feedback from school employees and constituents about the board's performance. Outsiders can provide a broader and more diverse perspective. Many problems that surface in board meetings are unrelated to meeting procedures. A poor working relationship with the principal or superintendent may produce various difficulties if there is no clear definition of which tasks are delegated to administration and which are the responsibility of the board.¹³

Conclusion

The school board and the principal should work as a team to achieve common goals. Therefore, training is needed to ensure a cooperative operation. Funk and Funk compare a school board without training to a professional baseball team that takes the field without spring training.¹⁴ Team members must know the rules of the game and understand their organization's goals and needs.

Teachers, support staff, and administrators receive formal training for their jobs. Adventist school boards are often the only entity of the school operations that are inadequately trained to serve. One way to remedy this is to provide governance training for each new board member and continuing education for re-elected members of the board.

Conferences should require a system of board assessment to ensure accountability and to fulfill accreditation requirements. Conferences can

also partner with Adventist institutions of higher education to offer courses in governance training that provide continuing-education credits. Board members can obtain information from state associations of school boards. Several U.S. states now require a specified number of hours in governance training to maintain a seat on a public board of education. Although there are differences between the structure of public school boards and those of church school boards, there are also many similarities from which we can draw useful lessons. Research and experience have shown conclusively that governance training does improve school board performance. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2003), p. 4.
2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1913), p. 13.
3. National School Boards Association. *Becoming a Better School Board Member* (Washington, D.C.: National School Boards Association, 1982), p. 13.
4. Nicholas D. Caruso, Jr., "Mistakes Board Members Make," *American School Board Journal* 188:2 (February 2001), p. 26. (Hereafter abbreviated as *ASBJ*.)
5. The Southern Union Conference is part of the North American Division and includes the U.S. states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Tennessee.
6. Nathaniel G. Higgs, *An Inquiry of Governance Training, Perceptions of Board Members' Qualifications, and Board Assessments of Day Academies in the Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists* (doctoral dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 2001), pp. 71, 72.
7. Abe V. Feuerstein and V. Darlene Opfer, "School Board Chairmen and Superintendents: An Analysis of Perceptions Concerning Special Interest Groups and Educational Governance," *Journal of School Leadership* 9:4 (July 1998), pp. 386, 387.
8. National School Boards Association, *Becoming a Better School Board Member*; p. 89.
9. An *attractive nuisance* is something, like a playground or a swimming pool, that attracts children and has the potential for causing injury. Schools can be held liable if they do not make a good faith effort to block access to attractive nuisances when supervision is not available, and make the location as safe as possible when children and adults are using it. This includes appropriate ground covering under outdoor playground equipment; leather, rather than wooden, seats on swings; mats and padding for gymnastic equipment, and fencing and locked gates to block unauthorized access to swimming pools. The board should ensure that attractive nuisances are inspected on a regular basis and that necessary repairs and corrections are made in a timely manner.
10. Southern Union Department of Education, *School Board Manual for Seventh-day Adventist Schools* (Decatur, Ga.: 2000), p. 15.
11. Theodore J. Kowalski, "Why Your Board Needs Self-Evaluation," *ASBJ* 108:7 (July 1981), pp. 21, 22.
12. National School Boards Association, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, U.S.A.: <http://www.nsb.org>.
13. S. A. Anderson, *Successful School Board Meetings* (Springfield: Illinois Association of School Boards, 1983).
14. Kara F. Funk and Richard S. Funk, "Illuminate Your Board," *ASBJ* 179:6 (June 1992), p. 16.