



Craig Mattson

Preparing to Serve on the Local K-12 School Board



Congratulations! You have just accepted the invitation to serve on the local K-12 school board. Now what? Our schools are sacred—consecrated to God; each institution is an important link in a global network dedicated to educating children in Christ. A new school board appointment or election is a call to service and thus will require preparation for the work. While there is much that could be said about being a new board member, I will discuss five best-practice points that helped me as I began my tenure on K-12 boards.

1. Learn About the School

The first step in training oneself for board service is to subscribe to all the school's communications and newsletters and request older copies of these documents (at least three-to-five years' worth of these materials should suffice). New board members should invest the time necessary to read through current and past issues of school newsletters and publications to become familiar with the rhythms of the school and the nature of the school's operations. New board members should also review past board

minutes and financial statements, educating themselves about the issues that the school has navigated and the structures that govern its operations.

Second, new board members should obtain adequate training. Most schools and/or conference offices offer some form of school board orientation. If no orientation is offered, then there are still abundant resources available for new board members to use for training. In 2017, the North American Division Education Department published a *Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventist Schools*.¹ This publication provides an overview of school board operations that every new school board member will find beneficial. The manual covers issues relating to school-board organization and function, effective board membership and meetings, board subcommittee work, school finance, curriculum and instruction, as well as a range of other key topics. Another resource that a new school board appointee can access is the Adventist Learning Community (ALC),² which maintains an archive of training videos and courses, including a series that focuses specifically on school-board training and orientation. In his one-hour training video on the ALC, Larry Blackmer, for-

mer North American Division vice president for education, discusses the characteristics that make for a successful school board term of service. These two resources provide a distinctly Adventist orientation that will help new board members better understand their call to service.

2. Understand Both Governance and Operations

On what kind of board have you been called to serve? The work of the board can be very different, depending on the size of the school and the approach the school board takes to school governance and operations. Many school boards operate as a board of trustees, concerned largely with broad governance issues such as safeguarding the school's missional philosophy and working to develop institutional vision. This governance-centered work is often found in larger schools that have strong administrative teams that manage the day-to-day operations of the institution. Governance questions are often connected to a school's philosophy, purpose, and strategic planning goals. Examples of governance questions

may include: Should the school start a new academic program? Is the board comfortable renting the facility to non-Adventist groups? Should the school consider buying or selling land? Or, should the handbook be changed to address a new concern or trend? These governance-level questions can dramatically affect the school culture, depending on how they are dealt with by the board. It is helpful for new board members to know the history and range of topics that the board has navigated. This is where a review of the past board minutes becomes a useful exercise.

While all school boards ought to deal with larger governance issues, some boards spend a great deal of time focusing on school operations. Smaller schools that do not employ a full-time administrator often rely on their school board members to assist with the administrative “heavy lifting.” School boards that spend a lot of time on operations may deal with questions such as how to fix broken playground equipment, how the Christmas program will be organized, when to schedule a school landscaping work bee, or how to manage the school’s pre-registration event. A school board that takes on these operational tasks can be of great assistance to a head teacher who also carries a full teaching load. However, a board that invests heavily on operations must not neglect larger governance issues. It is critically important for every school board to be deliberate about scheduling time for governance-level discussions. A review of school newsletters and publications can help familiarize new members with general school operations.

Time management has a direct relationship to discussions about school governance and operations. Board meetings will vary in length and frequency. For example, consider a board that meets for an average of two hours per month on a 10-month meeting schedule. This school board

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has only 20 hours of governance time per school year. Viewing the board’s time from this perspective highlights the need to streamline discussions and keep board members focused on relevant and important issues. Highly effective school boards use time wisely and strike a balance between governance and operations that is right for the institution. As a new board member, it is appropriate for you to question the time value and weight that is given to agenda items.

3. Be the Giving Trustee

A school-board appointment is a call to serve—and service to the school should extend far beyond the boardroom. In the world of not-for-profit organizational leadership, it is an industry standard that board-level trustees are expected to contribute time, expertise, and money to the organization.³ This expectation is reinforced in our church by Philanthropic Services for Institutions, a North American Division entity, in their *Model for Academy Philanthropy*.⁴ This organization offers senior academy grants based on compliance with set criteria that includes financial commitments by all trustees. A personal financial commitment to the school should accompany board appointments. This commitment should not be seen as a burden, but as an extension of service and a blessing to both the board member and the school. This invests the soul of the trustee in the work, “for where your

treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁵ The amount given is far less important than the systematic benevolence provided to the school by the trustee.

In addition to financial commitment, board members should also commit to being public servants and vocal supporters of the school. Volunteering, even just an hour or two a month, can make a big difference for the teachers, administrators, students, and parents that a board member serves. Not only will volunteerism be appreciated, but it will also give the new board member a much more intimate view of the school, leading to better-informed discussions and wiser decisions. New board members should be creative in thinking about volunteerism and not just look at what the school needs to operate.

Board members can be a blessing to the stakeholders of the school in many ways. New board members could consider sponsoring a staff lunch, organizing a parent-appreciation event, volunteering to operate a marketing booth for the school at a local community event or fair, offering to read with a student, helping a teacher with grading or supervision, or starting a focused prayer effort. One commitment that all new school-board members ought to make is to show up to all school-organized events.

Board members should also commit to being vocal supporters of the schools they serve. This means being an intentional advocate and a positive public voice for the school. A trustee or board member who cannot speak well of the school he or she serves should step down: "If you can't be a cheerleader for the campus and its work, you can't be a good trustee, and you should invest your time in a place or project you can cheer for."⁶

4. Practice Personal Accountability

A commitment to serve on a school board must be accompanied by a serious and prayerful commitment to ethical conduct. There are numerous ways to abuse power if the board member is not conscientious about his or her role. Most school boards will ask new members to sign statements relating to confidentiality and conflict of interest with the intent to keep board discussions private. This commitment to privacy allows for honest discourse that is critical for successful governance. Highly functional school boards will invariably have disagreement and vigorous discussion before building consensus. This is part of healthy board operations. However, ethical conduct outside of the boardroom is as critical as participation inside of the boardroom. When it comes to the responsibilities of a board member, there is no such thing as a casual conversation. While disagreement plays a part of the governance process, highly effective school boards will emerge united behind the consensus message and the decisions that have been reached. Each member's personal conversations and conduct must reflect this consensus.

The importance of appropriate conduct by the board members outside the board room cannot be overstated. The local school board has broad authority. However, this authority is a delegated authority and exists only when the board has been officially called to order. In other words, the authority exists within the body of the board and not in any one member. This observation should properly in-

form a board member's conduct both in and out of committee. Board members must avoid behaviors such as leaking sensitive information, publicly disagreeing with voted board actions, exerting managerial influence with school teachers or administrators, and using their board membership to achieve personal gain or to benefit family and/or friends. A call to serve on the local school board is also a call to personal integrity.

5. Know Your Board's Endgame

Board terms of service do not last forever. Eventually, the assignment will conclude, and the board member will have the opportunity to look back on his or her work. Satisfaction will be found in a job well done. As board members reflect on their work, satisfaction should be found in the fact that they were good stewards of the financial resources entrusted to the board and also intentionally and actively advocated for the school both in the church as well as in specific venues in the wider community. A successful term of service will have supported the material needs of the school as well as the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of its teachers. Lastly, a successful board tenure will include a voice that clearly contributed to shaping an exciting institutional vision, guiding the school into a stronger future. In Adventist schools, there is eternal satisfaction in work that leads our children and young adults into loving relationships with Jesus Christ. A call to board service is nothing short of a call to engage in one of our church's oldest, hardest, and most rewarding ministries. You have been called to serve—now roll up your sleeves and get to work! ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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