

Governance Does Make a Difference

By Leonard Stob



How is your school doing as it deals with changes in politics, religion, family, community, economics, technology, and other causes of instability? Are there troubling changes in loyalty to the school? How can school leaders guide the school in these disquieting circumstances?

To navigate the changes, school leaders customarily follow one of two approaches. Each tactic has a governance model that supports its direction and style. A governance model is the organizational framework that defines the roles, limits, and responsibilities of the board, the school head, and the ownership group (such as church, association, or individual). The governance model determines how school leaders will pilot the ministry through the challenges of change by describing the decision-making process, who participates, and level of accountability. The mission statement determines the school's purpose and goal.

The most familiar governance system is the traditional model. The decision-making process customarily involves many people who serve on committees that report and make recommendations to the school board. This system makes decisions slowly, cautiously trying to minimize mistakes, criticism, and risk.

Boards under the traditional model wait for random issues to arise, identify specific problems and complaints, and then react. They are unsure about what they are trying to advance beyond "excellent Christian education." The result is a culture that is suspicious of any change.

Under the traditional model of governance, the school board cannot provide leadership that advances a purposeful, comprehensive vision of what "ought to be." It cannot address strategic issues until they are critically urgent. The board rarely initiates action. Even the board agenda is determined by committees and by sidetracking topics raised by individual board members during "round table." The school board's role is reduced to being a passive final filter that approves or disapproves recommendations. The school head is a manager, carrying out

the assignments of committees and the board. There is no predictable, criteria-based accountability.

This process of decision making is known to breed political pressures from powerful individuals and groups. School boards eventually admit that if they are to address strategic issues they must detach themselves from involvement in day-to-day problems and entanglements of political influences.

When the board concedes that the school is not meeting expectations, it often adopts a second governance approach, namely, to run the school like a business. Schools often adopt a governance-by-policy model similar to that proposed by John Carver.

This alternative model promises to make the school more professional, proficient, and consumer sensitive. The board operates by policies, hires the school head as chief executive officer, and holds him or her accountable for the success of the school. Boards may hire a school head with a background in business rather than with educational training.

School boards that adopt the governance-by-policy model are often pleasantly surprised by the initial energy, smoother decision-making process, and relief from political pressures. The board finds it can concentrate on improving the school's image by promoting academic superiority and financial stability. However, these advantages arise because the board has become autonomous, effectually owning the school, and self-perpetuating by appointing its own members; it therefore is liberated from outside controls.

There are some unexpected consequences when a Christian school adopts this model. First, as promised, the board's focus is on business goals, on processes, and on reaching business benchmarks such as financial growth and increased consumer satisfaction. The school's philosophy and mission then become primarily marketing slogans rather than tools designed for internal structuring and planning. The board sees its principal responsibility as to provide facilities, equipment, and

financial support. The board has little to do with education, except to demand good academic test scores. The board leaves the faculty on their own to develop a “Christian” perspective in the classroom.

Second, because the school board is autonomous, it is not directly accountable to any ownership group such as a church or parents. Without accountability, the board can modify any aspect of the school it chooses, including revising or ignoring the mission and founding beliefs. The potential is organizational drift with the school floating from its central positions and beliefs. What prevents these schools from following the path of well-known colleges that began as Christian learning centers only to become prestigious academic institutions known for challenging the Christian faith and worldview?

There is a third governance model that handles change by blending the best of both models and repairing their major weaknesses. The mission-directed governance model is adaptable to a diversity of world cultures, size of schools, ownership models, and educational philosophies. The goal is that the board, administration, and faculty together pursue purposeful Christian education with vision, unity, and accountability.

The mission-directed governance model ties school accountability to the local ownership group. When the church and community are assured that the school’s founding positions are secure, they then support the school’s leadership to strategically and boldly adopt and implement mission-enhancing initiatives.

The school board can lead by initiating goals and priorities that promote student growth in knowledge of and relationship to Jesus as Savior and Lord and student training to advance Christ’s kingdom in the students’ personal life, family, church, and community. Only under mission-directed governance does the board oversee Christian education as a purposeful, holistic, integrated endeavor and hold the school head accountable for producing student learning that is consistent with the mission.

With a well-articulated mission statement, the school leadership can intentionally align curriculum, programs, and policies to accomplish that mission. To assess the school’s present status and to establish plans and priorities for improvement, the board needs to

gather information that measures the important aspects of Christian education. For example, it is important to measure student academic results, but it is also important to measure growth in Christian discipleship. Measured evidence should also demonstrate the extent school programs and personnel are producing targeted results.

These plans enable school leaders to build a realistic budget that includes financial and personnel resources required for the plans to succeed. This same data provides yardsticks for evaluating the school head.

While having different roles and responsibilities, the school board and the school head are a team working together to achieve the same goals. This is not an adversarial relationship. The board hires the school head as chief executive officer to accomplish its expectations by operating within policies and ethical principles. The school head is to provide vision, leadership, and supervision of the faculty and staff and oversee results. This allows the school head to involve the faculty and staff in evaluating and creatively improving the curriculum and programs to stimulate more effective and meaningful student learning.



Mission-directed governance provides the option to educate deliberately with vision, unity, and accountability.

In these dramatic times of change, it is necessary to purposefully advance Christ’s kingdom through Christian education. School leaders must lead with resolve to accomplish what God is calling them to do. Mission-directed governance provides the option to educate deliberately with vision, unity, and accountability.

Having retired from 40 years of innovative leadership in Christian schools, Leonard Stob, MEd, continues his passion for advancing Christ’s kingdom through distinctive Christian education that nurtures whole-life discipleship. He is recognized for designing the mission-directed governance model that allows boards to lead with vision, unity, and accountability. He is also the vision bearer for The Liberian Circle.