



The Challenge of Maintaining Impartiality on Adventist K-12 School Boards

Promoting and maintaining impartiality is one of the most essential functions of an effective school board. Board leaders and members must be able to represent different groups in the church and community, and ensure that diverse voices are represented when making educational and administrative decisions. Church and educational leaders who work with school boards must provide members with training to ensure that members understand their responsibility to ensure impartiality as a decision and policy-making entity. These training sessions should help school board members understand that in their roles, they are either exacerbating, perpetuating, mitigating, or eliminating inequities. Leaders should also help school boards work together to create and adopt clear statements to show their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. These princi-

ples are essential to the effective functioning of a school board.

School board membership is made relatively easy for church members who, in most cases, are elected by their school constituencies, and this is commendable; however, while membership requires minimal qualifications,¹ the process of becoming an effective board member takes time and a willingness to learn. Every year, the school board member should become better and better at asking questions about policy and assessing whether the board and all affiliated with the school are fulfilling their mission and vision for the school.

With training and experience, effective school board members learn to distinguish between appropriate oversight and micro-management. They learn to identify the difference between partiality and impartiality in school board relationships with the school and community. This article examines some of the threats to im-

partiality that undermine effective decision-making by school boards and suggests ways to identify and, if possible, prevent or mitigate them.

A Call to Impartial Service

Board membership should never be viewed with a sense of entitlement or special privilege. When a school board member (or the entire board) regards church office as an entitlement or position of power rather than a mission, this can lead to problems of partiality and favoritism based on friendships and connections with individuals (including relatives) who have a high profile and influence in the Seventh-day Adventist Church community. Whatever their backgrounds, all Adventist families deserve access to Adventist education and its benefits based on the principles of equality and impartiality.

Peter Drucker, a well-known educator and management consultant, un-

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underscores the purpose of board membership when he observed that “over the door to the nonprofit’s boardroom should be an inscription in big letters that says, ‘Membership on this board is not power; it is responsibility.’”²² Board members must be highly conscious of what they are saying, how much they are talking, and to whom, to avoid the accusation that they are not being impartial. Every school board member deserves (and needs) a good orientation that emphasizes ethical behaviors and servant-leadership qualities as his or her first responsibility to the school community.

The challenge of maintaining impartiality on Adventist school boards can be exacerbated by a church school system that depends primarily on unpaid volunteers to serve as board members. Karl W. Kime, in his article “Streaming the Adventist School Board” writes, “Because service is voluntary and unpaid, [board] members may view the position as requiring little work or commitment.”²³ Compared to public school boards, Adventist school boards may not receive the same scrutiny or accountability from the constituency as elected officials of public school districts. However, on the positive side, the dependence on voluntary members underscores the intrinsic motivation and commitment to Christian service by board members who help make Adventist schools successful year after year.

To be successful, school boards have a primary duty to develop and maintain the trust of their constituents and stakeholders. Confidentiality plays a vital role and acts in concert with impartiality in ensuring that members make fair and evenhanded decisions. In a world where technology is rocketing us into the future, the school board cannot afford to lose its ethical underpinnings.

Some questions to ask about your school board: Do the members maintain confidentiality when expected to do so? Should the members sign a Confidentiality and Impartiality Agreement as part of their Code of Ethics Statement? Understanding that confidentiality extends to information

about students and teachers, staff employees, their families, and affiliations with organizations or education offices (including state and national education agencies) means that the importance of confidentiality should be emphasized.

The Need for Board Training Relating to Impartiality

Even though all trustees, officers, executive committee/board members, exempt employees, and volunteers at Seventh-day Adventist organizations in the North American Division are required

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to sign a Statement of Acceptance of the church’s Conflict of Interest/Ethical Foundations policy/ guidelines annually,⁴ there remain certain “gray areas” that are rarely discussed or reviewed. These gray areas include issues related to the integrity of the school board and whether it is acting in the best interest of the school, its students and employees, and its constituents. Such gray areas can be eliminated or minimized when the organization/school uses its mission statement (a brief description of an organization’s reason for existence) as a filter for all its planning and deci-

sion-making. A well-stated, purposeful school mission statement filter tends to provide clarity and strengthen core values like impartiality, confidentiality, and integrity.

Sharland discusses the challenge of impartiality and believes that as human beings, “we are all constantly making assumptions about people, and often we do not consider which ones are accurate and which are not.”²⁵ This means people can choose to justify or defend their assumptions, and sometimes can jump to wrong conclusions and make mistakes that reveal a bias or prejudice that may never have been intended. As a result, board decisions can have good intentions but lead to bad outcomes.

Sometimes the motives and rationale behind school board decisions can be highly questionable and seemingly at odds with the board’s adopted ethics policy/statement and moral work of governance. This is one reason why professional development for the school board members must include impartiality training and awareness, to increase the possibility that fairness and evenhandedness are consistently applied in the process of decision and policy making.

When board decisions have nothing to do with God’s leading, but everything to do with who’s-on-whose side, it gives the appearance of school members being willing to trade grace and ethical behavior for power. No matter how aware board members are of their school board’s code of ethics and conflict-of-interest policy, their knowledge will remain abstract and theoretical until they care about the individuals who face the negative consequences of partiality and favoritism.

Impartiality Defined

While many Adventist school boards are composed of sincere, honest, dedicated members who serve with integrity and donate their expertise and time to serving their school communities year after school year, it is important to realize that everyone carries attitudes (biases) and stereotypes that can affect their understandings, actions, and decisions. Sometimes biases and stereotypes get in the

way of sound judgment when critical thinking and more information are needed to arrive at a well-reasoned decision.

Impartiality should be the governing principle of how a school board provides service to the school community. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* explains the difference between “impartial” and “partial” by stating, “to be ‘partial to’ or ‘partial toward’ someone or something is to be somewhat biased or prejudiced, which means that a person who is partial really only sees part of the whole picture. To be impartial is the opposite.”⁶ It turns out that impartiality (or being impartial) is important for policy making and the proper interpretation or translation of school board decisions. Further, demonstrating consistency of impartiality helps boards to develop a reputation as being trustworthy and professional.

Threats to Impartiality

Since there are times when school boards must mediate conflict, it is important that threats to impartiality and fairness be eliminated before they escalate into more damaging circumstances. The following list is not intended to be exhaustive but may represent some of the more common threats to impartiality in K-12 Adventist schools:

1. *School boards members fail to identify and present all the facts but instead choose to highlight only those facts that support their preferences.*

People are prone to believe what they want to believe. Confirmation bias, a predisposition often seen in current global culture wars, “is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one’s prior beliefs or values.”⁷ This type of bias can spill over into school board meetings and can lead to wrong decisions and policies. When board members are exposed to new and challenging information, confirmation bias can cause them to reject it and become even more certain that their own beliefs are correct. The adage of “a person/group is entitled to their own opinions but not their own facts” would seem in-

structive for this scenario.

2. *Inappropriate actions of school board members during financial activities involving procurement or bidding processes and contracts.* Adventist school boards, like all public entities, enter into public contracts. A public contract happens whenever the board buys goods and services, regardless of whether there is a formal contract. Purchasing goods such as computers and paper products, paying for services such as construction, or hiring individuals to write grant applications are all examples of public contracts. These expenditures are routine and necessary for the continuing operation of an educational program. However, conflict-of-interest and ethics guidelines prohibit school officials and employees from selling goods or providing services to their school district or church-operated school. Therefore, school board members should never use their position for personal gain.

Annetta Gibson’s article “A Board’s Duty of Care in Financial Oversight: How to Avoid the Question: ‘Where Was the Board?’” reminds us that “when people agree to serve on a board, they also assume responsibility for the institution’s finances as part of

fulfilling their fiduciary responsibility for duty of care. The board has a responsibility to ensure that policies are in place to not only prevent the abuse and misuse of financial resources but also to address such irregularities when they occur.”⁸

Further, Ellen White cautions us that: “The accounts of every business, the details of every transaction, pass the scrutiny of unseen auditors, agents of Him who never compromise with injustice, never overlook evil, never palliates wrong.”⁹

3. *Excessive and unreasonable discipline decisions.* The North American Division (NAD) *Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventist Schools* states that “It is essential that people be treated fairly and given due process, even when rules obviously have been violated and the resultant discipline is predetermined by policy. Legally and ethically, the board should protect employees and students from excessive, unreasonable discipline.”¹⁰ Failing to follow these guidelines can create divisions within the school constituencies and undermine the financial and moral support for the school. The “margin for error” is very small for boards that do not take their legal and ethical responsibilities seriously.



An example of this is when the socio-economic status of the student/-family to whom the student is related or connected can make all the difference in who stays in school and who must leave (or who is suspended and who is not).

In his article entitled “Some Legal Considerations for Operating Boards in Adventist Schools (K-12),” Lyndon Furst wrote, “every Adventist school should have a student handbook or school bulletin that identifies the rules of behavior that are to guide student life as well as the procedures to be followed when students step outside those rules.”¹¹ To avoid accusations of excessive or unreasonable discipline, school administrators and school boards must consider the legal implications and consult with the school’s legal counsel. Following the school’s established process published in the school handbook helps to guide and maintain impartial discipline decisions by the board.

4. Nepotism and favoritism to families of influence or position. The *Collins Dictionary* says that “nepotism is the unfair use of power in order to get jobs or benefits to your family or friends.”¹² A typical school-based example of this is when the issue of partiality “heats up” involving a board member’s child or relative. Board members of smaller K-8 Adventist schools often include parents of students who are well acquainted with the offending student’s family and may have difficulty remaining impartial in determining the appropriate discipline due to personal biases.

When school boards desire to hire the most qualified candidate or best candidate for the job, and that candidate is a relative of a school board member, this can lead to accusations of nepotism. Sometimes a husband and wife, or two other close relatives may be nominated to serve on the same K-8 school board since the pool of candidates from a small church may be limited, or other church members have declined to serve. This scenario can also generate claims of nepotism.

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in church culture, people in positions of power may not go out of their way to correct a false assumption if it plays to their advantage or personal beliefs. This scenario illustrates how favoritism can help a person remain in a position of power or influence.

The complexities of nepotism and favoritism demand that each school board have a written policy that is part of its school board manual/code of ethics statement. *The School Board Manual for the Southern Union Conference Office of Education* has a voted

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policy that “only one family member shall serve concurrently on the school board. (Any exception to this policy must be approved by the local Conference Office of Education).”¹³ Each K-12 school is encouraged to adopt the same language in its school constitution and/or local school board manual.

5. Implicit Biases. Implicit or unconscious biases are the automatic reactions we have toward other people based on our past learning, experience, and expectations. Adriana Vazquez, in her article *How to Mitigate Your Unconscious Bias*, writes that “unconscious bias relies on instinct instead of analysis. So unsurprisingly, the judgments

and conclusions people come to are often incorrect, but more importantly, they can be discriminatory.”¹⁴ She continues, “While we all have biases, many unconscious biases tend to be geared toward non-dominant groups based on factors such as class, gender, sexual orientation, race, religious beliefs, age, and ability.”¹⁵

Although implicit biases often occur unintentionally, they can affect judgments, decisions, and behaviors. Research by the National Institution of Health has revealed that implicit bias can pose a barrier to recruiting and retaining diversity in the workplace.¹⁶ Implicit biases can happen when the ability or skills of a person are questioned because of his or her social identity. This can happen at employment interviews or during performance reviews when school boards present recommendations for rehiring/non-hiring of teachers to their conference education office.

Project Implicit is a nonprofit organization and international collaborative of researchers who are interested in helping people become more aware of their implicit bias. The organization offers tests and instructions on how to use that awareness to align actions with a group’s intentions, make better decisions, and build organizations where everyone can thrive.¹⁷ Other implicit bias tests can be found online that are particularly helpful to educators and leaders of organizations in developing an awareness of their implicit bias.

The Impartial School Board Chair

The school board chair plays a key role in creating and maintaining the perception and reality of impartiality. It is important that the chair refrain from expressing his or her views/opinions regarding agenda items and from participating in other board meeting discussions and debates. This may not always be the practice of board chairs of Adventist K-12 schools, since it is not a specific guideline outlined in the *NAD Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventist Schools* (or similar documents produced by other divisions). The manual does indicate that the primary role of the chair is to fol-

low parliamentary procedure and encourage discussion relevant to agenda items.¹⁸ However, there is no statement in that document that indicates how much influence a chair should have on the selection of and decisions regarding agenda items under discussion.

Hamlet Canosa affirms in his article “Governing Boards: A Practical Guide to Best Practices and Policies” that “care should be exercised by the chair to avoid filtering discussion through his/her opinions. The chair facilitates, and not controls, discussion, allowing for consensus to emerge.”¹⁹ This statement provides clarity, but there continues to be some confusion over how much restraint (if any) the board chair should maintain when discussing or opining on particular agenda items.

Should the board chair lobby other board members for their support of particular agenda items outside of board meetings? Is it appropriate for the board chair to present his or her views on agenda items during board meetings? Should the chair engage in *quid pro quo* deals to garner support and votes for special projects or proposals? What should be the best practice for the leadership of Adventist school boards? According to Shekshnia, a good board chair should listen carefully to determine the consensus of the board, avoid the use of “I,” and never take up more than 10 percent of the airtime during any board meeting.²⁰ With more specificity, Shekshnia adds, “though many newly minted chairs are eager to put their knowledge and experience to full use, the harsh reality is that collective productivity suffers when the person at the head of the table has strong views on a particular issue.”²¹

When there are conflicts of interest, it should be the responsibility of the board chair to ensure that they are dealt with and documented in the school board minutes. This provides a record of how these issues (including partiality) were processed and brought to resolution.

Nick Price writing for *BoardEffect* believes “documenting disclosure of a conflict of interest in the meeting min-

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utes serves multiple purposes. Primarily, documenting conflicts and potential conflicts will help nonprofit organizations avoid undue penalties or other sanctions. Recording conflicts also serves to clarify that the board takes conflicts of interest seriously to any member, third parties, observers or regulators, which is also a reflection of the organization’s reputation for having strong ethics.”²²

Moving from the role of manager to that of facilitator should be the *modus operandi* of a good board chair to increase the effectiveness of group discussions and maintain impartiality. A leadership style that incorporates collaboration and builds consensus to arrive at a solution helps ensure that problems get solved. While there may be times when the full board wishes to know the position or opinion of their chair on a particular matter, the chair must always include the caveat that he or she may only have limited information and thus cannot make a conclusive statement. The board chair should not be caught in a position of discussing his or her opinions or decisions prematurely or showing partiality to one solution over another. Perhaps a good rule of thumb for board chairs to remember is the only time

they should not be expected to be impartial is when describing their new son, daughter, or grandchild!

The board chair sets the tone for the entire school program and its constituents. There are students, parents, staff, and the community carefully watching to observe how the board leadership functions and governs. Board chairs set a positive example when they establish a culture of impartiality, integrity, collegiality, and collaboration, which helps to build confidence throughout the school community. Without such an example, confidence in the school program suffers, and those parents who may be considering an Adventist education for their children will look elsewhere for what they perceive as a better investment and environment.

Impartiality Training

Impartiality training, then, is essential to the effective functioning of school boards. Adventist school boards are rooted in strong spirituality as a primary resource to guide their decision-making process, which includes sessions of prayer where they commit themselves to submission to the will of God, who asks board members (and all believers) to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NIV)²³ in all their deliberations. From a biblical perspective, we see that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34, 35; Deuteronomy 1:16, 17) in His dealings with human beings. School boards are compelled to act when injustice is evident and remain faithful to their core values of impartiality and integrity as followers of Christ and as Christian servant leaders.

Ellen White referred to Scripture (James 3:17) when she wrote in 1890 that “[t]here should be no giving of special favors, or attentions to a few, no preferring of one above another. This . . . is displeasing to God. . . . Let all who are connected with the institution . . . bear in mind the words of inspiration: “The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of

mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”²⁴

With these principles in mind, the church has created several resources that offer training to Adventist school board leaders and members (see “Training Resources for Adventist School Boards”). These materials and others can facilitate stronger school board member relationships, inclusiv-

ity, and a sense of community, which in turn increase productivity, creativity, and innovation.

Adventist school boards have been gifted with Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy for instruction and guidance for promoting and maintaining impartiality and integrity in our church schools. Through corporate/individual prayers and devotional time that are

part of each board meeting, the members of the school board can be led by God’s Spirit to effectively shape the experiences of students and employees so that they are consistently treated as individuals of equal dignity and worth.

Conclusion

Impartiality includes many qualities and actions that affect human relation-

Sidebar: Training Resources for Adventist School Boards

The Adventist Learning Community (ALC)

ALC, sponsored by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, is an educational platform designed to strengthen professionals through continuing-education courses. Specific to school board leadership and board members are three mini-courses that include important understandings and guiding principles of impartiality awareness.* These digital courses are free and can be completed at the student’s own pace and convenience: Adventist K-12 School Board Leadership Training (0.10 CEU); Adventist K-12 School Board Legal and Financial Issues Training (0.10 CEU); and Adventist K-12 School Board Legal and Financial Issues Training (0.10 CEU). More about these course offerings can be found on the ALC website: <https://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/?keyword=School%20Board>.

Incentivizing volunteer school board members to complete a minimum number of continuing-education units (CEU) for each year of service should be a consideration that is discussed and recommended by all conference and union education offices of education. This could be as simple as recognizing the professional development of individual board members at the end-of-year school business meeting that is open to the church members and the public. This also conveys an important message to the school community that the church is active in supporting the professional development of all servant leaders, whether they be employees or volunteers.

As the ALC continues to expand its free digital courses providing continuing education to church employees and volunteers, a course offering entitled “Christian Ethics and Leadership for Board Members” would provide a greater focus on impartiality training for all K-12 school boards.

Theme Issues on Boards in *The Journal of Adventist Education*[®] (JAE)

Over the past several decades, JAE has provided several theme issues on the topic of boards. The most recent issue was published in 2019 as Volume 81, Number 1. This is available online at <https://www.journalofadventisteducation.org/2019.81.1> and as a PDF at <https://www.journalofadventisteducation.org/assets/public/issues/en/2019/81/2019-81-1.pdf>. Prior theme issues on the topic can be found online in Volume 62, Number 2 (1999); Volume 66, Number 5 (2004); and Volume 70, Number 5 (2008).

Other Training on Bias and Impartiality

Other training is available that gives information and skills needed to reduce and manage biases. Impartiality training, or Unconscious Bias Training as some refer to it, teaches people to manage their biases, change their behavior, and track their progress. The training provides them with information that contradicts stereotypes and allows them to connect with people whose experiences are different from theirs. Carmen Acton, writing for the *Harvard Business Review*† offers three strategies to help leaders to be aware of those biases that can impact their decision-making process:

1. “*Acknowledge that you have biases. Then, educate yourself to do better.*” Acton lists several questions that will help stimulate reflection on personal beliefs, the people and experiences that have shaped these beliefs, and how these influence our actions, intentions, and levels of empathy.
2. “*Let others challenge your assumptions.*” Our experiences and the life lessons that come from them influence how we see ourselves. These experiences help shape our conscious and unconscious thoughts about ourselves and others. Interactions at home, school, with peers, and with various media should challenge the way we see ourselves for the better.
3. “*Be open to feedback.*” As individuals, we thrive on approval and like to know that we’re doing a good job; however, it is not only about us but about the people God has called us to serve. To serve effectively, we must continually and intentionally assess how our actions, policies, and words impact others.
4. “*Embrace diverse perspectives.*” Encourage and welcome feedback from diverse voices—people who have different experiences. Seek it out, build relationships, and expand networks. This stimulates growth and makes for a more inclusive atmosphere.

* Adventist Learning Community, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, School Board Mini-Courses: <https://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/?keyword=School%20Board>.

† Carmen Acton, “Are You Aware of Your Biases?” *Harvard Business Review* (February 4, 2022): <https://hbr.org/2022/02/are-you-aware-of-your-biases%2018>.

ships and effective school board leadership. Among these are ethical behavior, integrity, empathy, commitment to mission, fairness, and being able to handle conflict. Paramount among these is empathy, which requires thinking about the person on the receiving end of one's comment or action. In short, being a school board member is based on human relations. It means working as a team with clear roles toward a common goal.

The job description for school board membership includes a commitment to be fair, just, and impartial in all decisions and actions. All decisions must be based on the philosophy and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its education system. Our theology must underpin all our relationships with the constituents and stakeholders of the school. Political ideologies should never interfere with school boards and decisions.

Because their words and actions can damage the public's opinion of Adventist education—and have serious legal implications—board members must comport themselves in ways that honor their professional impartiality. Whenever a school board intentionally reflects and evaluates its principles of ethics, impartiality is often a determining factor on whether its decision-making process represents integrity and, at times, courageous Christianity. It is good board policy to remember that justice and mercy are for all (Zechariah 7:9), without distinction. ✍

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