

K-12 Adventist School Boards:



Adventist education is foundational for church growth and identity, but its continuation is not guaranteed. It must be defended and renewed with each generation. Each new school year can be a test of loyalty for church communities to determine if funding this evangelistic enterprise is worth their time and effort. How do boards present a persuasive case to parents and church members? Understanding that enrolling students in Adventist schools can make a big difference as they become contributing citizens in this world and for God's kingdom is not always a given. So, how do we continue to move forward, recognizing, as Taylor points out, that "Adventist education is the longest and largest evangelistic event held by the Adventist Church"?¹

School boards are charged with --defining and furthering the school's

mission and ensuring its success in achieving curriculum and instructional goals for modeling and teaching Christian behavior, providing religious instruction, and ensuring the integration of faith and learning. This unique evangelistic opportunity is too important to leave to fate and must be continually renewed, adjusted, and adapted to meet the needs of its students and church communities. To a large degree, the success of Adventist education depends on how well school boards manage their schools now and lead them into the future.

Now, more than ever, school boards must acknowledge and respond to an increasing sense of urgency regarding school governance that includes all education stakeholders expecting educational leadership to provide continuous improvement and ready solutions to the persistent challenges that schools face. The quality of education provided in an Adventist school is directly related to its school board's mission, vision,

professionalism, and efficiency. As a result, school boards are persistently confronted and challenged regarding how they lead and support this vital work of educating the young people of the church and community.

Effectiveness and Relevancy

The effectiveness and relevancy of school boards today need to be re-examined to purposely lead Adventist schools forward. John Mannes believes that "Our national conversations on education should include more discussion of effective school system leadership."² Are they prepared to lead? Are school boards equipped to handle the challenges of culture, structure, change, finance, and admissions to ensure their schools remain open and thrive? What will school boards look like in the future? Will they be agents of change or defenders of the status quo? How boards func-

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tion, both now and in the future, will determine if schools will be successful and relevant in addressing the changing and evolving needs of their students and church communities.

Independent School Management (ISM), an organization that provides resources for independent schools, has summarized the mission of school boards by stating, “the Board’s core activity is planning, and the Board’s primary constituency is not today’s students but the students of the future.”³ This article identifies some best practices that I believe will empower boards to lead their schools into the future more effectively and responsibly while at the same time continuing the sacred trust of being “mission keepers” of the school.

Setting Tightly Focused Goals Using School-based Data

What can we expect from school boards, and how can we measure how well they accomplish those tasks? Which goals should be considered most important by school boards? Is there a process to help school boards identify goals that should be adopted? Broderick believes that school boards, both now and in the future, should be able to “set tightly focused goals and rigorously monitor their district’s progress towards meeting those goals, use data to monitor and evaluate progress, ensure resources are allocated where they can make the most difference, and constantly strive to improve instruction and learning for every child.”⁴ It is vital that school boards include these goals now.

The adage “Doing one thing and doing it well” can resonate with school boards, which may feel overwhelmed if too many goals are introduced each school year. Too many goals can kill productivity and creativity. Having only one goal makes self-control more successful than when people have two or more conflicting goals. With too many goals, boards often are afraid of making the wrong choice, so they end up doing nothing. Still, boards must learn to manage multiple tasks. Bridges identifies seven easy ways to

stay focused on achieving a specific goal or task. These include setting goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant/realistic/recorded, and timely (SMART), visualizing and scheduling goals, finding ways to manage distractions, avoiding procrastination, prioritizing, and tracking progress—all of which requires taking the “big picture” and breaking it down into manageable parts.⁵

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ment. If this does not become the board’s standard operating procedure, then school improvement succumbs to a hit-and-miss exercise each school year. It is one thing to identify a problem but quite another to use data to determine what is and isn’t working in each school (see Sidebar on page 13). Using data specific to their local school should help boards make timely decisions, implement meaningful change, and redirect resources to support excellent teaching (and administration) and improve student learning.

Board Members Need Sustained and Specific Training

Board members must be appropriately prepared and expected to perform as competent, caring, consensus-based leaders. Becoming an effective school board member is more of a process than a pronouncement. Hekman and Smoley believe that Christian school boards are typically composed of dedicated volunteers who are interested in the school’s mission but lack the training to lead and complete the difficult work they face. While public school board members can receive specific training from state and local agencies, Christian school boards mostly receive little, if any, formal training. Helping school boards understand that intervention and training can improve their effectiveness needs more emphasis in Adventist schools.⁶

Within the Adventist system, board members are volunteers who commit to serving. As a result, careful consideration must be given to monitoring the expectations and valuing the time and commitment of these volunteers.

The importance of school board training has had and continues to have substantial support for public education stakeholders in the United States. An example is a recent survey by the Michigan Association of School Boards. The statewide survey of 600 persons showed that 74 percent of the responders/voters “reported their belief that formal professional development instruction for school board members was either ‘Essential’ or at least ‘Very Important’ (33 percent and 41 percent, respectively). Significantly, this sentiment among an overwhelming majority of the respondents cuts across all demographic subsets such as age, race, religion, region of state, formal education level, income level . . .).”⁷

The most recent *North American Division (NAD) Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventists* (2018) recommends two resource modules for effective school board membership. Both modules (Adventist K-12 School Board Membership Training and Adventist K-12 School Board Legal and Financial Issues Training)

Sidebar. Obtaining a Data Picture of Schools

School board members who wish to lead their schools competently now and into the future will want to obtain and analyze data that will give them a better sense of their current reality. Administrators and school board members should be able to access and review a “data picture” of their school that includes a three- to five-year response to the following:

1. Union/conference/district assessment data
2. State/provincial data
3. Recommendations from the most recent school evaluation
4. Average daily attendance in order to assess absenteeism rates and address them
5. Number of referrals for special education services (specifically if receiving assistance from the public school district)
6. Number of parent conferences regarding student discipline
7. Number of suspensions and expulsions
8. Number/percent of special-education students/students requiring Individual Education Plans
9. Student satisfaction or perception assessment
10. Alumni satisfaction or perception assessment
11. Parent satisfaction or perception assessment
12. Teacher/staff satisfaction or perception assessment
13. Administration satisfaction or perception assessment
14. Church/community satisfaction or perception assessment

While many other indicators could be added to the above list, it is up to the discretion of each school board to determine which indicators will be most helpful in their quest for school improvement and developing focused and relevant goal(s) for the school year (or longer if necessary). Positive responses to the above indicators will provide evidence that the school has a culture that values learning and academic success for every student.

quires no training or preparation, Adventist school boards must take the next step of requiring sustained training of all new and returning school board members. Candidates for the position of school board chair should only be considered eligible if they have successfully completed several CEU credit modules relating to school board leadership.

During the Renaissance Adventist Education Summit that convened in Orlando, Florida, in 2010, several hundred attendees were asked to identify obstacles that hindered Seventh-day Adventist schools from thriving. The attendees cited school board competence as the number one obstacle, concluding that “Boards receive inadequate training for governing schools.”⁹ Adequate professional development of school board members will better prepare them to put the needs of the students first. It will signal to the students, school staff, community, and other stakeholders that the board and conference administration are serious about school improvement because they are intentionally developing effective school leadership skills. Board members must realize that ongoing learning is not just for teachers but is vital for everyone involved in educating children and youth.

Access/Contract With Social Workers Must Be Part of the School Staff and Partners in the School Mission

One primary aim of true education is to restore human beings to the image of God as revealed by the life of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ We need not look that far from our church pews to see that many families and children in our schools need restoration and assistance.

Children and youth today are increasingly victims of many social forces that hinder and interrupt their role as students in our schools. Students attending Adventist schools are not immune from those forces. Since children spend a significant portion of their time in schools, school boards must recognize that this is the primary environment where children and youth learn to grow academically, so-

are excellent resources for new school board members.⁸ Other continuing-education training courses for board members are available through the Adventist Learning Community (<https://adventistlearningcommunity.com>). While these modules are not mandatory for Adventist school board members, they can help them understand the organizational structure and how they can effectively serve their local school.

Conference and union leadership could work together to create and establish a system of evaluation for additional modules or mini-courses to address board members’ unique roles and responsibilities. Such training

could include a more detailed emphasis on understanding and managing school budgets, team building, building board and community relationships, diversity, the liability of members, accountability to the school’s mission/vision, how to build school data-information systems, visionary leadership, etc. These and other topics could be added to the Adventist Learning Community website (<https://adventistlearningcommunity.com>) as continuing-education (CEU) modules for Seventh-day Adventist school board members.

While school board membership in most Adventist schools currently re-

cially, emotionally, and spiritually. Students in Adventist schools can be affected by problems such as poverty, family relationships, drug and alcohol use, violence, various forms of abuse, and mental-health issues. Difficult transitions in their lives (i.e., grief and loss, depression, parental separation and divorce, bullying, etc.) can hinder and even prevent them from reaching their full academic and personal potential. Previously, the availability of help and resources for such students in our schools was often limited. Therefore, schools are finding it necessary to employ full-time or part-time school social workers.

Church communities and parents rely on teachers to create a learning environment that will help students succeed. They expect teachers to provide basic school supplies, ranging from sophisticated technology (e.g., computers and tablets) to basics such as pens, pencils, notebooks, rulers, erasers, and other classroom tools. In some places, teachers supplement these basics with their own funds since many students don't have these items. These and other new realities (i.e., school safety drills, active shooter drills in 90 percent of public schools, and proposals for armed security staff on campuses) give students the idea that schools are unsafe places and have increased stress levels for both teachers and students. In addition to safety concerns, many children and young adults experience adverse childhood events (ACES) that impact their ability to succeed in school. The prevalence and impact of these traumas are evident in the global population.¹¹ Miller indicates that "children who have been neglected or abused have problems forming relationships with teachers, a necessary first in a successful classroom experience. They've learned to be wary of adults, even those who appear reliable since they've been ignored or betrayed by those they depended on."¹² Given the global prevalence of trauma, more and more students in Adventist schools need care for these challenges. Trauma-based education and counseling are

necessary services that schools must be prepared to implement on short notice. This means that classroom teachers need additional professional support to work with busy parents to provide the education their children deserve. Without additional professional support, many children will receive a poor start in life, leading to lowered economic prospects for the future. School social workers have the potential to be the bridge that helps school boards/educators obtain resources to meet classroom and student needs.

Students who have been marginalized or disenfranchised for whatever reason can experience the hope of realizing their educational potential with the help of a school social worker as part of the school team. Ellen White addressed this issue in particular when she wrote: "The question will often arise: What can be done where poverty prevails and is to be contended at every step? Under these circumstances how can we impress minds with correct ideas of improvement? Certainly, the work is difficult and unless the teachers, the



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thinking men, and the men who have means will exercise their talents and will lift just as Christ would lift were He in their place, an important work will be left undone.”¹³ Intentionally supporting the mental-health needs of children and youth within the school environment will positively impact the school environment and teaching staff.

Strengthen Relationships Between the School Board and the Superintendent

The relationship between school boards and superintendents can be strained at times if boards decide to micromanage or challenge the superintendent’s decisions on management. While it may sound simple to state that the school board governs and the superintendent administers, it is often difficult for the board and superintendent to understand and clarify these roles. The Hanover Research Review states, “the most common types of confusion in districts involves superintendents focusing too heavily on policy and school boards extending too far into administrative functions.”¹⁴ A fractured relationship between the superintendent’s office and the local school board can negatively affect the school program’s success and indirectly influence students’ learning experience.

Failing to understand the proper roles of the board and superintendent can lead to poor communication, lack of trust, conflict, and, ultimately, the closure of the school. As a general rule, boards establish policies, set priorities and goals, and maintain the operation of the school facility. Superintendents identify district needs and policies, evaluate the outcomes of the day-to-day operation of the school educational program, and recommend the hiring and continuation of teachers’ contracts. When a board decides to micromanage the superintendent’s decisions on management, this can create an uncomfortable and unproductive relationship.

Within the Adventist school governance system, the opportunities for building trust and respect between the

superintendent and local school board can be limited due to geographic factors and other office duties that superintendents must perform. For some school boards, the only time they may see their conference superintendent is when there are personnel items to review that require the attendance of the superintendent or associate. Superintendents must be proactive rather than reactive when building trust and respect in school board relationships.

While the *NAD Handbook for Superintendents of Seventh-day Adventist Schools* indicates that “the conference superintendent and/or associates should regularly attend a reasonable number of board meetings at each school,”¹⁵ this particular guideline may provide too much latitude for a conference superintendent to decide what is a reasonable number of board meetings to attend each school year, a consideration often based on the schools’ geographical distance from the conference office. Superintendents and their associates must be more intentional and accountable now and in the future to ensure that their relationships with their school boards are maintained at optimum levels. This may include video conferencing or Zoom meetings with school boards as a substitute for face-to-face communication. It may require more face-to-face meetings with executive members of each school board at the local conference office on an annual or semi-annual basis. Scheduled meetings with school board chairpersons from each district/conference school would also serve to build rapport and encourage discussion of policy items, school evaluations, vision setting, school board training programs, etc. School boards and superintendents will increasingly need to collaborate and consult regularly to enhance the quality of education and performance of the students entrusted to their care.

Incorporate More Student Voices in Decision Making

Stakeholders sometimes question educational policymakers regarding the purpose and meaning of a particular item or decision. A typical response is, “We are doing this for the good of the students.” While this may be a sincere and honest assessment, the fact that students are mostly not included in district-wide or school-wide decision-making leaves them “outside the window looking in” and prevents them from sharing with decision-makers their ideas about what is “for the good of the students.” It is time for students to become more involved in decision-making activities that affect them, their fellow students, and their school. Fletcher says that including students as school board members “may be the most powerful untapped resource available to educators and school leaders today.”¹⁶

When Google hosted a meeting for the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) digital consortium in Chicago in July 2016, they realized they were planning how technology would transform schools without considering the most influential voices—the students.¹⁷ As superintendents at the consortium explored the future of learning together, they concluded that “putting student voices at the center of everything we do will help us design the future with them and for them. . . . it occurred to us that students are our users, and our users weren’t part of our conversation as much as they should be. Without their input, we wouldn’t be poised for success, because we weren’t.”¹⁸

Fletcher offers several purpose-filled steps to get student voices on the school board. Students on a school board can serve as voices and consultants regarding their “on-the-ground experience” at their school and as advisory, not voting members. The benefits of incorporating student voices include the following:

1. Students learn the processes used to shape and improve education.
2. Students can provide regular

feedback to the administration regarding current school policies.

3. Students and parents become better informed of important school policies.

4. Students can provide input and share their perspectives regarding the development of policies.

5. Students can build important relationships with the leaders of their community who serve on the school board.¹⁹

A successful school board will partner with the community to ensure it can respond to the hopes and aspirations of the young people under their care. One meaningful way this can be done is by intentionally including student voices on the school board.

Improve School/Community Partnerships

Adventist schools must never lose sight of their primary purpose. Our school/church communities can instinctively recognize whether our schools are fulfilling their mission of preparing students as contributing citizens in this world and for God's kingdom. They know if their school board has veered into "mission drift" and adopted a different agenda. The mission and vision of the school must be shared with the community, so our schools can reap the benefits the community has to offer.

Students will better grasp the importance of the school's mission and vision as they connect with the school community. School boards can encourage and support the school by becoming involved in building/improving school-community partnerships. Such partnerships can pay substantial dividends when the community becomes part of the school's identity. Below are some suggestions on how boards and school leadership can work collaboratively to build or improve school-community partnerships:

1. Student-led evangelistic meetings: Junior high school students can preach sermons directed to their peers and the general community by pitching a tent on campus or holding meetings in the school gymnasium or local

church. Such events often result in faith lessons as the student body and community witness baptisms and church/community support.

2. Class service projects: A variety of projects can be scheduled that provide weekly or monthly opportunities to serve the community and which can be integrated into the Bible curriculum. Community involvement can help "shine the light" on students whose talents may not be apparent in the classroom.

3. Encouraging community use of school facilities: The school building/gym often sits empty at the end of a school day and on weekends. Encouraging non-profit community groups to use the facilities (with appropriate oversight) can allow the school to get involved in community projects.

4. Banquets for senior citizens: The students can invite the senior citizens of the church and community to a luncheon banquet at the school at least once a year. The school can ask a business or non-profit corporation to sponsor the event with the assistance of parents.

5. Hosting community cooking schools and health evaluations: Nutrition education and tips for a healthy lifestyle benefit both the students and the community. Increasingly, people are interested in learning how to live healthier lives and cook healthful foods to save money and avoid the health hazards posed by the high fat and sugar content of fast foods.

6. Career days: Planning at least two career days per school year provides a great educational experience for students. It also enables local businesspeople and professionals to learn more about the school and its needs, and to share their experience and expertise.

7. Communication/message boards: Schools can use communication or message boards at the front of the school to thank businesses/organizations for their involvement and special donations or announce school-sponsored events.

8. Back-to-school week: The school board and administration can

invite community members and business leaders to attend school for several hours or even a day. When people learn more about the school, this tends to open doors and promote a better understanding of the school's mission.

School boards need to understand that the more interaction and collaboration their school has with its community, the greater the likelihood that resources and school support will increase. The adage, "It takes a village to raise a child," can be reimagined by boards by advocating that it takes a community to raise (and sustain) a school. When schools and community organizations work together to support learning, everyone benefits.

Summary

Real change and sustained growth begin at the local level. School boards must play an essential role in achieving student growth and school improvement. Boards, now and in the future, must operate differently. They must not only rely on mandates from districts/conferences alone but independently collect crucial data from their respective schools to make decisions and prioritize goals (see sidebar). Ensuring continuous professional development of school board members will generate innovative and creative problem solvers to deal with the complex issues that face boards daily. Boards must also work collaboratively with superintendents to ensure that the school mission works in tandem with community needs and that school administrators and staff implement it in all aspects of the program.

As Broderick indicates, "With all this on their plates, school board members have an important role in positioning our districts for a future in perpetual motion. To survive and flourish, we need to govern in ways that value creativity, dreaming, proposing, and risk-taking."²⁰ Consider the following words:

"The men whom God has connected with His institutions are not to

feel that there is no improvement for them to make because they stand in responsible positions. If they are to be representative men, guardians of the most sacred work ever committed to mortals, they must take the position of learners.”²¹

The role and responsibility of the Seventh-day Adventist school boards require more learning about visioning and governance as we move further into the 21st century. To maintain their central position in educational governance, boards must be future-ready rather than satisfied with the status quo. Board members of K-12 Adventist schools can't wish where their school and students will be four or five years into the future; they must design it now. ✍

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