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## **BOARD GOVERNANCE AND TEACHER EVALUATION: WHERE DO THE TWO MEET?**

*Posted on August 1, 2015*

Boards worldwide are contacting this Consultant seeking information about how they can ask legitimate questions about teacher evaluation, teacher accountability and appropriate oversight of those functions. In other words, what is the role of the Board in ensuring there is a thoughtful, rigorous, fair yet consistent policy of teacher evaluation or appraisal in place?

Historically, most boards have stayed away from straying too formally into the realm of teacher evaluation other than to criticize (along with other parents on the car pool line) a perceived poorly performing teacher. However, recent emphasis on teacher quality have prompted some boards to form subcommittees on this topic. Or, they may use existing sub committees to probe the school head/director to demonstrate more clearly how effective evaluation is carried out, and whether tenure (real or implied) exists. Is this an appropriate use of board subcommittees?

Boards expect instructional leadership from their heads and other academic leaders. Often division heads/principals feel they do not have the time for effective teacher evaluation/observation/supervision. Often that is true, but teacher evaluation is not a favorite past time of most senior educational leaders as most do not receive sufficient training or mentoring/coaching in supervising teachers.

Another board member wrote recently:

"Management does not have a robust annual performance appraisal system for its teachers beyond the third year of hire. This is something our HR committee is looking into and I fully expect them to recommend an annual performance appraisal model to be administered by management. Is there any reason not to go down this path?"

This is a legitimate question which then goes down a worrisome path: Should there be an HR Committee? Should a board committee recommend an appraisal process that the administration will implement? The answer is: "No" But there must be some serious administrative/head leadership that demonstrates to boards (and parents) that heads do not adhere strictly to professional development and growth in lieu of formal appraisal after the first 6 months, one year



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or three years. That approach wins great adherents among teachers but not much support among parents or parent board members.

This same board member raised a second question:

"In addition, as in any school I expect, there are always a small number of teachers who do not find favor with a decent number of parents. What are best practices to handle this? Currently the only recourse here is to speak to a department head or head of school. There is no formal mechanism for parents to assess the quality of the teaching they receive (or other aspects of the school's programs). A lot of parents feel reluctant to go so far as to knock on the headmaster's door or worry about being perceived as a troublemaker.

Is there a place for an annual, simple survey at the end of each school year allowing parents to review the school's performance? Is there a better way to systematically gather this data? A type of Ombudsman position? In life these days it's nigh on impossible to transact business without being asked to survey or review the experience. At the end of the day if the school had access to this type of data, albeit there will be whiners included, would it not be for the benefit of management to have this type of data? A satisfaction survey every 2 or 3 years which we have done here tends to deal more with higher level issues and meeting mission."

Again, a very legitimate question and it deserves a forthright answer. Surveys can be risky, even dangerous if conducted for the wrong reasons, in the wrong way at the wrong time and used inappropriately. That is a lot of "wrongs" but unfortunately surveys often result in misunderstood and improperly used results.

What is the Answer?

This Board member's key question is: how do parents handle criticisms of teaching and individual teacher quality? This Consultant replied that the chain of command is still the best course, but that the car pool line and email exchanges evaluate teachers informally all the time. There ARE schools which conduct on line appraisal of all teachers by name but allow for no comments and only about 4 to 6 questions. These results are shared with the teacher in the first year or two and not with upper level administration. But over time, the goal is to share the results with mid and senior management.

While this methodology may be a potential wave of the future, it has great risks. Teachers are notoriously fearful of such seemingly innocent efforts to seek parent input on teacher performance. Teachers are truly caregivers and not change agents and they have seen all too often the results of powerful, focused, helicopter parents who intrude unfairly. While this Consultant worries about the validity of individual parent evaluations of teachers, our Firm does support student feedback once



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or twice a year from children as young as third graders. While there may be a huge gap between the fairness of student feedback and the possible unfairness of parent feedback on individual teachers, it is the parents who lobby the board.

So while this Consultant worries about on line teacher surveys for individual teacher performance, the best defense is a good offense. That means getting out in front of the Board and parent body with a robust, honest, process of teacher evaluation that is more than a combination of professional development, peer coaching, self reflection and goal setting. Even though the latter appeals to teachers, to parents and parent-run boards, it sounds like "enabling poor performers. There is some truth to both sides of that argument.

There are many governance issues here:

1. All boards should have 20 to 30% non-parents, i.e. past parents, alumni, community leaders and not a board of 100% current parents
2. Most board committees are unnecessary. The core ones that should be in place are Head Support, Committee on Trustees or Nominating, Finance, Facilities, Development, and Strategic Planning. Ones that are unnecessary and can be dangerous are Education, Athletics, School Life, Personnel or HR, Marketing, and other similar committees that are really designed to help board members intrude into management with formal permission. All these areas are the domain of the school's leadership which the board hires to oversee exactly these functions.
3. Boards tend to form these more intrusive committees as a result of some incident or crisis; when they may not trust the skill set or performance of the head and/or his or her team; or when board members who may have too much time on their hands are looking for something else to do other than engage in their strategic roles.
4. Build a really strong board with wisdom at the core; find ways to keep long term valued trustees while adding "fresh blood" to the Board. The biggest reasons heads are fired are loss of board institutional memory; followed by not managing the pace and type of change properly; followed by an incident that runs out of control.
5. Boards have three strategic functions only: Mission clarity and definition; the hiring, nurturing, affirming, evaluating and changing of the head; and all fiscal matters such as taking on debt, raising money, setting tuition, managing the endowment, etc.

When board members begin to move formally into creating a role for themselves in teacher evaluation, it is time for the head to do the following:

1. Insist on more regular formal board training



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2. Ensure that you are ahead of the game on teacher evaluation and not allowing sloppy teaching to continue
3. Ensure that the Chair and Head are on the same page. remembering that 80% of all governance problems are due to issues between the Chair and Head but keeping in mind that 20% of all governance issues are because the chair/head partnership is too close and excludes the rest of the Board.

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