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# THE POLITICIZATION OF BOARDS ON RE-OPENING OUR SCHOOLS

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Independent and international school boards are a microcosm of our parent bodies. Most board members are professionals as opposed to business leaders and CEO types who tend to defer to the Head on operational issues.

These boards are dominated by well-meaning volunteers, usually parents, past parents and alumni, and they bring to their deliberations all of the knowledge and biases from those varied experiences and backgrounds. However, most day school boards in the USA are made up overwhelmingly of current parents.

Current parents of independent and international school children are very concerned about paying tuition and some fees and not getting their full value. They are anxious about the real possibility of their children falling behind in their academic progress and emotional and social development if schools remain physically closed. Regardless of their age, school-age children build their networks and connections around in-person interactions. No matter how sophisticated remote learning may be, there is overall agreement that it is lacking on some levels depending upon the age of the student; the availability of resources; the degree to which teachers embrace and develop it; and parental circumstances and the at-home learning environment. These are just a few of the factors that affect the quality and effectiveness of remote learning.

Current parents are hearing conflicting messages in the media almost daily. The general consensus is that middle and high school age students can be the spreaders of the virus and are usually asymptomatic. It appears that younger children can attend school relatively safely since they are less likely to become seriously ill from the virus. Even if schools put in place a well-conceived and well-researched hybrid model of onsite and online learning combined with a wealth of recommended safety precautions, parents, grandparents and teachers fear infection.

Independent and international school boards seem to be split about 50/50 on how to reopen in the next six weeks. This is probably a reflection of the parents as a whole nationwide and worldwide. This theme will dominate board governance for several months to come: What are the risks of opening or not opening? What are the financial consequences of either decision? What are the



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liabilities if one or more students or staff become infected? Do we then retrench? While boards and administrators are doing their very best to make informed decisions, what are the consequences if one or more choices turns out to be the wrong one?

One School had a group of early childhood teachers who refused to open on line with distance learning for children ages 3, 4 and 5 in September because they felt that it had been ineffective and too challenging for this age group this past spring. The Head supported them. Whose decision was this to reopen or not this part of the School in early September?

Board members wearing their parent "hats" weighed in. It WAS a Board decision. Was this not a mission decision? Was this not a financial policy decision? These areas belong in the realm of the Board's responsibility to safeguard the School's mission, right?

On the other hand, others said it was NOT a Board decision. It was a program decision, a safety decision protecting teachers. That belongs in the Head's operational realm, right?

These boundaries of authority were blurred, and all were partially right and partially wrong. Ultimately, the Head's decision prevailed with some compromises.

The point here is that these kinds of discussions, disagreements and splits are occurring all over the world not just between boards and heads, or teachers and boards, but within boards. The Pandemic is feeding on insecurities and causing some poor governance practices. Normal and recommended governance training and protocols are tending to fall by the wayside.

In some schools, parents are organizing groups supported in part by disgruntled/disenfranchised board members. These groups are aligning against the full board and the head's leadership. Some of these parent groups want to delve into the finances of school, faculty contracts, the head's compensation, the governance structures, by laws and articles of incorporation and the safety of the facilities. In other words, some parents want, for now at least, to BE the board.

How will good governance prevail in all of this? How will heads of school fare with one more challenge added to the already heavy plate of roles and responsibilities that they are now bearing? And at the same time some heads are being asked by many schools to take a pay cut or no pay increase.

Keep in mind some core rules:

1. One of the most important strategic planning initiatives is board development, i.e. how to cultivate, screen, invite, orient, train, evaluate, warn and remove board members. Strengthening our boards is the goal. The greatest talent any board member can bring to the table is thinking and acting wisely, not reactively.



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2. The selection of the board chair is crucial and should be based on the four core areas needed to be a strong chair these days: character, skills, commitment and experience and with some "fire in the belly" when the board is challenged.
3. Be careful about the demands for "transparency". Usually the more you share the more a sub group of parents want. Give out what is reasonable and appropriate but do not overlook the long game of protection of the mission and the integrity of governance.
4. Support your head but listen carefully and constructively. Listening does not mean agreement.
5. The school is only as good as its board. Ultimately, that is true because even strong heads cannot succeed with errant boards.
6. Remember when a board is confronted by so many challenges, it should talk in the board room but not outside the board room and not throw the head of school "under the bus".
7. Long term boards with a strong institutional memory tend to lead to longer term chairs. Longer term chairs tend to support and ensure longer serving heads. Generally, longer serving heads leads to stronger schools, financially healthy bottom lines and a consistent interpretation of program quality and mission over time.

The opposite is also true. Short term boards lead to short term chairs who lead to short term heads. This in turn leads to constant transitions in leadership and the loss of quality, reputation and financial health.